

you lit a fire in my soul

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/24628510) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/24628510>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Video Blogging RPF , Dream Team RPF
Relationship:	Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Porn With Plot , Porn with Feelings , Bottom GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , top dream , Anal Sex , Anal Fingering , Teasing , Light Dom/sub , Praise Kink , POV Second Person , POV GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , The Nether (Minecraft) , Mild Horror , Supernatural Elements , Porn with too much plot , Deep Throating , 69 (Sex Position) , Dissociation , Implied/Referenced Self-Harm , Rough Sex , Rough Kissing , Overstimulation , Multiple Orgasms , ruined orgasm
Language:	English
Collections:	MCYT
Stats:	Published: 2020-06-09 Completed: 2021-06-14 Words: 33,112 Chapters: 3/3

you lit a fire in my soul

by [Yikes \(Mr_CoralFlower\)](#)

Summary

George's POV

"Do you have a face behind that mask, Dream?"

His head tilts to the side in what you've learned to interpret as a smirk, and a breeze rustles the leaves.

"Do you have a heart beneath that skin?" he asks you, putting his hand on your chest. You breathe in sharply, and he chuckles at you. He's touching you. You find that you like that quite a lot.

Notes

this was supposed to be no more than 2K words with super minimal plot and then my idiot writer brain went "what if they go to the nether though. what if you use your encyclopaedic knowledge of minecraft to put in tiny details no one else will notice" and i gave in

this was inspired by Caved In by freelyf4llen (if you ever orphan that work and don't want it traced back to you just let me know and i'll edit ur name out of the AN)

anyway, it made me wanna try writing sub george, since i think every fandom needs variety and there's waaaay more bottom and sub dream in the tag than i expected to see. also, its the reason this is like, set within a minecraft world instead of the real world. i liked the way freelyf4llen handled that and i wanted to try it out

i started this whole au for the sole purpose of writing sub bottom george and then 7K into it i finally got to the smut and at that point i barely felt like writing smut anymore 😊

so i took a break from writing this and came back to it later.

for anyone new here, this is in 2nd person from george's pov, so "you" means george. it'll feel weird to read at first but people say they get used to it. you'll probably get the hang of the style by the time you get to the smut.

and i know its set in minecraft but the most unrealistic part of this fic is that someone likes anal. imagine being a bottom, could not be me

legit though, that was so hard to write cus i had to stop projecting quite as hard on george lmao

fellas is it gay to write smut about 2 other guys?

anyway!!!! enjoy lol. there's tons of easter eggs in this fic regarding mc mechanics and the new update so have fun

- Inspired by [Caved In](#) by [freelyf4llen](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You meet him one evening just after sunset, by the river. You blink, and the next moment he's crouching on the opposite bank, eerie and silent. You freeze instantly.

This is a monster. It lives in the forest, probably, judging how its skin has a soft green tint. The weirdest part is its face, though. You can't tell if it's a mask or some kind of exoskeleton, and its smile is terrifying.

Yet you find yourself unable to move until it turns fluidly and leaps back into the forest a few moments later.

It takes you a long time to feel comfortable around him. He never speaks, but despite the mask of bone, he's incredibly expressive; every movement he makes conveys so much. He knows how to disappear into the trees like an apparition.

It's months before you first hear him speak. He's helped you up into the very top of a tree, and you're seeing the world from his perspective now. The sunlight looks different from up here, and his mask is pure white, shimmering in the sun.

"What's your name?" he asks you, and you blink at him, mouth falling open.

"Uh- it's George," you say, belatedly remembering the stories, and what they say about names. Hopefully he won't use your name to turn you into a frog, or something.

"I'm Dream," he says.

"Do you have a face behind that mask, Dream?"

His head tilts to the side in what you've learned to interpret as a smirk, and a breeze rustles the leaves.

"Do you have a heart beneath that skin?" he asks you, putting his hand on your chest. You breathe in sharply, and he chuckles at you. He's touching you. You find that you like that quite a lot.

"Well, yes, of course--"

"But do you ever want anyone to see it?"

You frown, confused.

"I mean, if-- that would mean I was dead, so no."

"Exactly," Dream says, and you look at him in a new light, unsettled by the implications of those words. "I can do this though."

The bottom section of the mask, the part below that smile-like groove, slides down like it's hinged, and you see a regular mouth, a pair of lips.

"Woah."

"Anyway, wanna play tag?"

"Wh--"

You're distracted by the novelty of seeing an actual facial feature on him, hearing an actual voice. That's your excuse for your bad reflexes.

"You're it."

He pulls his hand away and leaps along the branch, into a different tree.

You chase after. You spent your childhood in woods like these, after all, and you know how to climb a tree.

You don't catch him until he lets you a few minutes later, and you don't bother running away.

"Let's not play tag," you say shortly, and he laughs, leaning in close.

His lips brush your ear as he whispers,

"But you're so much fun to chase, George."

He stays with you for winter, in your little cabin, and he sleeps quite a lot. He refuses your offer to let him have the bed, and sleeps beneath it instead. He says he likes the enclosed space. You insist that he take a blanket, though.

"What did you do for winter last year?"

"I slept," he says. "Usually I sleep. But this year I wanted to see how you humans get through it. That's why I helped you get food before."

You had wondered about that. It seemed strange to you that he led you to beehives and brambles and hills of perfect mushrooms without asking anything in return, but you see now that he was paying you back in advance for letting him stay.

There's a night that's especially cold, with wind howling along the sides of the house, and you're thrust back into the past, when you got lost as a winter storm was starting and nearly froze to death before you could find the house. You're shivering. Your cousin's fiancée hands you a mug now that you're warm enough to shiver, it's hot coco, you take a giant sip--

That's not hot chocolate. It tastes horrible, actually. You pry your eyes open, and it's a sign of how well you're used to him that you don't flinch at the sight of his mask, centimeters from your face. The jaw hinge is shut. He's inscrutable. You frown down at the mug in your hands.

"What is this?"

"I don't know how to make things for eating," Dream grumbles. "Not for humans. I tasted it, I think it's fine."

"That's like the bitterest parts of dandelion greens mixed with burnt coffee."

"Dandelion greens are the best food in the world," Dream says defensively, and you start chuckling at him, but the wind gives an insistent whistle, and you flinch instead. "Are you okay?"

You huddle up under your covers, and Dream lifts the mug from your hands, drains it, and pulls his blanket up from the floor to settle in beside you. His skin is warm. You go still.

"Um, I'm fine," you say.

He scoffs.

"Don't lie to me, George," he says. "Just be honest about it if you don't trust me. Are you cold? I really don't need the blanket."

The subtext is clear to you: *we can change the subject*.

You steer back around, though.

"I nearly died in a storm like this when I was little."

A warm arm lands around your shoulders, and you snuggle into him, unable to help it. He pats your head and then squeezes you tight, and you let your breath go out of control for a moment just to get a break from it. He breathes so steadily that it isn't as hard as usual to get your rhythm back to normal.

You get an arm around his waist and hold on, and you fall asleep in his arms that way as he murmurs nonsense to you and makes everything in the house seem warmer, more glowing.

You wake up warm. You open your eyes to his face. His breath is soft, and he's so much warmer than the air around you that it's quite tempting to just snuggle back into his embrace. Usually you wake up to the cold air biting at your toes and nose and fingertips.

But the air really is frigid. You need to stoke the fire up, and put more wood on.

You struggle out of bed, wiping the sleep out of your eyes, and--

There's snow in the fireplace. Okay, that isn't right. You peek up your chimney to see the cover has blown clean off in the storm. You'll have to replace it.

And you don't know if you have enough tinder to start a whole new fire.

You set to work anyway, though, because you have no choice. At some point, Dream wakes up and starts watching you.

You can't get the fire started.

"Do you have a bucket?" Dream asks quietly, and you frown.

"Of course I have a bucket," you scoff.

"We could bring some soul fire back from the nether," he says quietly, and your head snaps up to look at him.

You've heard tales about the nether since you were a little kid, about the horrors that live there, the ghastly sound of the place. The sand that drags at your feet, the way the ground squishes like flesh.

"It's real?"

"Of course it is," Dream says. "I've been there."

"I'll die," you say, looking back down, and Dream reaches out to tap on your chin. You look at the eye-markings of his mask, and he says,

"I'm not going to let you die, George."

"But-"

"Do you trust me?"

You sigh, and nod your head, staring at the floor, at the new calluses on your hands from trying everything to start the fire back up. You're cold enough to give up at this point.

He leaps from the bed, clear across the room to you, and wraps you up in a blanket. It's warm, and he's tender, so you submit, shutting your eyes and leaning against his shoulder.

"Alright, we can go to the nether," you murmur.

"I'll take care of everything," he tells you. "I'll pack."

"I'm so tired," you respond, and he seems worried as he leans over to grab a bag from the shelf above your table. You don't really understand why.

When you next wake up, you are warm again, but something is wrong. There are strange sounds here, a bubbling, the sound of a craftsman. You open your eyes.

There is stone above you. You sit up. Dream is sitting at a table in the corner.

"Where are we?" you call out.

"Underground," he says. "I'm making some shields before we go to the nether. You should--"

A clattering of bones, and Dream leaps in front of you with the half-finished shield. An arrow sticks out of it, and he makes a displeased face. You wonder if anything will ever catch him off guard. Apparently not today.

"Thank you for the arrow," he calls out dryly to the hole in the wall.

"What was that?" you ask, and he grimaces.

"You probably shouldn't watch this," he says, and you glare at him.

"What shot that arrow?"

A second whizzing sound, and you squint into the darkness to see--

Cobbled together stone, blocking up the passageway, but before Dream put it there, you could have sworn you saw a skull.

Dream tugs the arrows out of the shield and sets back to work on it.

"What was that thing, Dream?" you ask, and he heaves a sigh.

"A skeleton," he says.

Your stomach flips over.

"Oh," you say with a shudder. "What's that weird, burbling sound?"

"Lava. We're going to use it to get to the nether."

"...Why not just bring some back up?"

"I think the snow would freeze it," he says. "And it's dangerous. It could burn down your house. Soul fire is easier to control."

You nod quietly, and stretch out your arms, yawning. Then you go over to watch him work on the shields. He knows what he's doing, but he shows you how to help, guiding your hands through the right motions until you understand. He's a patient teacher.

He makes swords as well, and just watching that makes you nervous. You've never needed a sword before. You're starting to hate it down in this cave.

There's a low moan from your left, and you shudder, leaning into Dream and asking,

"What was that?"

"Zombie," he says nonchalantly, like it's no big deal.

"There were never this many monsters up above, in the forest," you tell him, and he puts an arm around your shoulders to give you a gentle squeeze.

"There were," he tells you. "But most of them burn up in the sunlight. You avoided the night, so you wouldn't have seen so many."

"Did you see this many?"

He nods.

"You've probably never seen a phantom, have you."

Your brow furrows.

"What's that?"

Dream chuckles, and leans in closer. You feel like a little kid at a campfire, listening as the teens tell stories meant to freak you out.

"Well, if you go long enough without sleeping, you'll start to see something, just out of the corner of your eye at first. And then it swoops down from the sky with a scream. You tell yourself it can't be real, because you've never seen anything like it, but then it hits you. You feel cold inside, unsteady. And--"

"Okay, stop," you tell him, covering up your unease with annoyance. "Quit making things up to scare me."

He chuckles, and goes back to forging a sword.

You're watching a bat flutter around the cave and imagining it swooping down out of the sky to kill you. But bats are harmless, and it was just a stupid story.

Right?

Dream shakes you awake and puts a sword in your hands. You blink at it blearily and notice how shiny it is; you can see your reflection in the blade. You look tired.

"We're ready to go," he says, holding out a shield for you to take. You put it on your right arm, and Dream frowns. "That's the wrong arm, you should leave your sword arm free--"

"I'm left-handed," you say shortly, not looking right at him because you aren't ready for him to shut you out for it.

"Oh," he says. "Okay, cool."

You look up at him. He doesn't seem to find anything wrong with it, so you relax.

It's hard to tell, is the thing. Back during your year of travel, you were kicked out of a village for it. Their golem nearly beat you up. You tend to stay away from villages now.

"What do we do with the lava?" you ask him. You're nervous.

"I'll show you," he says. "Now we just have to get to it. I woke you up in the middle of the night because the caves are usually emptier around this time. The monsters like to get out while they can."

That explains how much more tired you are than usual. You thought it was just the discomfort of sleeping in a cave.

"Okay. You know where it is?"

"Well..." he trails off. "Not exactly. Down."

"Great," you say, a little bit exasperated.

"It'll be fine, George," he tells you, jaw hinge opening so you can see his smile. "I'm not going to let you die."

You nod. For some reason, those words are actually comforting. Maybe it's just nice to have someone in your corner. He shuts the hinge with a click and then takes his sword back out of his belt.

"Ready?" he asks.

"No," you say.

He chuckles, and shoves the pile of rocks out of the way of the opening to your little alcove.

"Just stay by me. As long as we're together, they can't kill us. There's strength in numbers."

"I don't even know how to use a sword," you complain.

"It'll be nimbler than your axe," he whispers, as you both begin to move out of the alcove. "Hold it up in front of you, so you're ready to attack. Just keep control over it, and you'll be fine."

"Easier said than done," you grumble, as your fingers twitch and the point of the sword drops a few inches.

"Spider," Dream says, and then you just focus.

When you blink back into thought, you're covered in string. Dream is staring at you-- well, facing you. You don't actually know how he sees.

"You're a natural," he tells you, and you feel your face flushing.

"Let's move on."

The two of you creep through the cave until you spot a glow on the wall, above a long fall.

"We could make that," Dream muses, and you shake your head, tugging him away from the sheer drop.

"And if we didn't, this would all be for nothing," you grumble.

"You're such a coward, George."

"I'm just being cautious," you snap, raising your voice a little higher than you should. "I don't want to die, Dream!"

There's a clatter and a groan from further into the cave, and then a strange hissing sound behind you. You start to turn, and then the world is fire. You feel your back slam into something hard, and then a swoop in your stomach that means you must be falling.

Hitting the ground is a painful relief, because it comes sooner than you feared, but hurts more than you expected. It's warm wherever you landed.

"Don't move, George," Dream says. He's above you. You squint up into the darkness and try to sit up. It hurts, so you stop trying. "I'll be right down."

He comes out of the darkness and lands beside you, and it doesn't seem to hurt him much.

"What was that thing?" you ask, and he sighs.

"Creeper," he says. You shudder. You thought they didn't grow down here, with no light. You've never seen one explode with so much force.

"They must be different in the caves," you rasp. "Don't they need the sun to grow?"

"They aren't plants," he tells you, holding out a bowl. "Take this, it'll heal you."

You ponder that statement as you drink from the bowl. Creepers have always been solidly in the plant category for you and everyone you know. They're more annoying than dangerous, though.

The stew is delicious. You can feel your body healing as you sip it, and then begin slurping.

"What did you put in that," you ask him suspiciously, and he grins at you.

"Oxeye daisy," he says. "Feeling better?"

You nod, and take his hand to pull yourself up.

You landed right next to the lava. You swallow hard as you realise how close you just came to dying.

You could have burnt up.

Dream starts piling rocks into the lava, and you shut your eyes, taking deep breaths to calm down, because you came so close to dying just then, and you didn't even realise until now.

"Watch," Dream says. You open your eyes to watch him. He pours water into the lava, and then props wood up to act as a support for the water to flow from as he pours more lava all around it. You're in awe at how casually he handles the molten rock. The glow of it lights up his face as he uses it to build.

"Wow," you murmur, admiring the muscles in his arms as he heaves lava upwards, and it turns into a shimmering black stone.

He smirks at you over his shoulder, and picks the water back up. Your stomach does another funny thing, but not out of fear this time. *Hey, hot stuff.*

"Now, we just need fire within the frame," he says, taking out a stick and using the pool of lava to ignite it. He taps the side of the black frame with the stick, and suddenly the space within shimmers. You flinch back.

This is wrong. Just looking at it makes you want to run away. You feel like you were never meant to see it.

"And now we go through," Dream says.

You shake your head.

"No," you say quietly. There's something wrong about this place, about the purple shimmer in the air. "No, I'm not going through that. No way."

Just the sounds it makes... You'd rather face an army of skeletons. It's horribly unsettling.

"We need soul fire if we're going to last through the winter," Dream reminds you, and you slump, putting your head in your hands and trying not to give up on everything.

It was so cold on the surface. This is a chance to fix that.

Somehow, you find another shred of bravery within you. It's hard, but you look up at Dream, and then through the portal. You reach out to touch the purple air.

And your head spins. You pull your hand back and clutch your head as your stomach rebels. You shudder, trying to keep down the stew you drank earlier.

Dream puts a sympathetic hand on your shoulder.

"It's really hard the first time," he says. "Just close your eyes."

"Okay," you mumble, holding onto him and shutting your eyes. He leads you forwards, and you feel that lurch in your stomach again, before--

It's warm here. You open your eyes and stumble. Dream catches your wrist just in time and pulls you back away from a hole in the ground.

The ground is squishy. You hate it. Dream is looking around, surveying the area.

"I think we need to go deeper," he says.

"What does that mean?" you ask with a yawn. You see him bite his lip.

"There's a fortress down that way," he says, pointing. You squint, straining your eyes, and you can just make out the shape of bricks through the fog.

"Should we go there?"

"We could," he says. "We don't have to. It's very dangerous there. Lots of monsters."

"Let's skip it," you say, and he nods.

"Alright. Look out, by the way."

He tilts his head, and you look in that direction to see a shambling monster with one floppy ear and a pig snout. You panic, lifting your sword, and Dream jumps between you and the monster with his shield up. You freeze, confused.

"What-- Dream, it's going to kill you--"

"The zombie pigmen are peaceful, to a point," Dream says. "You shouldn't hit them, or every single one in the area will go after you."

"Okay," you say. "Why'd you tell me to look out?"

"So you wouldn't hit it by mistake," Dream says, as though it's obvious. You heave a sigh.

"Alright, whatever," you say.

The two of you set off, giving the fortress a wide berth. Dream says to keep an eye out for a brown valley of blue fire, but everything looks brown to you.

At one point, you hear the whiz of an arrow, and react on instinct, placing your back to Dream's and holding your shield up desperately. There's a thunk, and an arrow sticks out of your shield. Dream looks over his shoulder, sees the arrow, and says,

"Thanks."

You're a little distracted, though, because there's a pig man in front of you. Not a zombie, but an actual pig man. A man pig.

"Dream," you say. "What is that thing."

"It's a piglin," Dream says. "If we wear gold, they won't attack us."

You frown.

"Wear gold?"

How do you wear gold? You miss the surface, where things made sense. You miss understanding how the world worked. Those were the days, when you could count on pigs to walk on four legs and men to not have snouts.

"Oh, look, there's a bastion right here," Dream says. "We can steal some gold from there, and then we'll be fine."

"Okay," you say, as he tugs you along towards the imposing structure. "Can we stop to sleep soon? I'm exhausted."

Dream stumbles to a stop, and you bump into him.

"Um, about that, George."

"What?"

"You can't sleep in the nether," he says, starting to move again.

"That's ridiculous," you scoff. "You can sleep anywhere, Dream."

"Well, technically I guess you're right," he says. "But if you sleep here, your brain will explode."

You don't exactly believe him, but now isn't the time to fight about it, because you're creeping into the bastion. It's so eerie here, with the sound of the war pigs snorting at one another echoing in every corridor.

"I found a chest," Dream whispers. "Keep an eye out for piglins, make sure none of them see me do this."

You haven't seen any so far, but you peek around the corners nonetheless.

"The coast is clear," you whisper back. Dream opens the chest and paws through it furtively.

"Aha!" he says, holding up a pair of shimmering gold boots. "Here, you take one of these, I'll wear the other."

"Why are they glowing?" you ask.

"That's because they're enchanted," Dream says. "See how the glow is shaped like treads on the soles? They've got a spell on them to give you better traction through the valleys of souls."

You spend a moment confused about sole and soul sounding the same, but then you figure it out. You tug the boot on as Dream shuts the chest, and at that moment, a piglin rounds the corner. He narrows his beady eyes at the two of you, looking particularly closely at your empty foot, but then he gives a little shrug and a snort and moves on.

"That was close," Dream whispers.

The two of you creep back out of the pig people's lair and back into the vast wasteland of the nether.

"You were joking earlier, right?" you say with a yawn. Dream looks over his shoulder at you and says,

"About what?"

"Sleeping. I'm tired, let's stop."

Dream's body language is serious.

"I wasn't joking, George."

You stumble.

"What, so I'm supposed to stay awake the entire time we're here? I'm starting to think this whole

trip is just some stupid joke you're playing on the poor vulnerable human--"

Dream puts a finger to your lips, and all of your anger drains away, replaced by exhaustion.

"I'm so tired," you tell him quietly, leaning against him and letting your head land on his shoulder. Your eyes slip closed.

"You can't sleep," he says, and you groan.

"I'm gonna fall asleep eventually, Dream," you tell him. "Humans can't stay awake forever."

"We'll make this journey quick, then," he promises.

"At least let me rest," you say, lifting your head to look at him pleadingly. "I need to lie down."

"You can't fall asleep," he insists.

"No promises," you say, pulling away from him to lay down.

"Get up, idiot," he says, pulling you back up, and you open your mouth to say something cutting, but he gets a blanket out and spreads it on the ground where you were. "There. Now you can lay down."

You sigh, and pull him down with you, holding onto him for comfort. Besides the blanket, he's the only familiar thing in this entire realm. You hate it here.

"Will I actually die if I sleep?" you ask with a yawn, and you can't detect any sign he's joking as he nods. "I don't know if I'll be able to stay awake, Dream. But I can't keep going if I don't rest."

You see him bite his lip, and then he leans closer until your foreheads are touching and says,

"Well... I could keep you awake."

You swallow hard. If he's implying what you think he is...

"Oh?" you say sleepily, blinking slowly. He puts a hand on the side of your face, and you *know* what he means, you know what he's offering. "Okay, yes. Yes, Dream."

His hands are soft, and his lips are tempting. He nudges you onto your back and then straddles your waist, one hand creeping up your side beneath your shirt, the other still on your face. You open your mouth and try to lean up towards him, propping yourself up with your elbows, but he keeps pulling back just short of a kiss. It's so hot down here, and Dream makes it hotter, with his gentle hands on your skin. You buck your hips upwards and hear him gasp into your ear.

"Let me kiss you," you tell him, and he shakes his head.

"There's something I want to hear first."

You heave a sigh, and put your hands on his waist, guiding his hips to grind down against you.

"What is it?"

His smile turns predatory, and you shudder at the sight of it.

"You're so eager," he murmurs. "It's so enticing, you have no idea how attractive you are."

"Tell me what you want me to say," you demand, and he chuckles, leaning down to whisper in your ear,

"I love you."

You gasp, and cover your mouth with one hand, reeling from everything that does to you. It's ridiculous how much it makes you feel. It's good, but strange, the way your heart beats faster and your face feels hotter and your dick gets harder. He loves you.

He loves you. And you love him. You pull him down against you, so that your chests touch, and say as quietly as you can,

"I love you too."

It feels dangerous to say, but he kisses you afterwards, so you can't focus on that. His lips are just as soft as they look, and he kisses you like he wants to dismantle you entirely, stealing your breath away to store in a bottle. You break the kiss just to get some air, and he moves his hands to your stomach, so close to where you want them but not quite there.

"Touch me," you gasp. "Please touch me."

"Look at you, begging for it," he breathes, and he seems genuinely amazed. It makes you shy. You duck your head. "So good for me, George, good boy."

That makes your head spin. You want to be good for him, you want to make him feel good.

"Please," you say again, and he slides one hand downwards to brush over the bulge in your leather pants.

"Such a pretty little thing," he says, and his voice is lower now. You let out an involuntary whimper and then cover your mouth again, embarrassed. "You sound so good, baby, let me hear you."

That humiliating sound happens again as Dream drags his fingers up your sides. Your back arches. He's doing this so easily, touching you like he owns you, pulling sounds from your throat like he's done it a million times before. It's overwhelming.

"Dream," you say, grabbing his wrist. "Please touch me, please just touch me."

He laughs at you and gives you another kiss.

"If I make you come, you'll get sleepier," he tells you, and suddenly everything feels tenser, more urgent. You aren't sure what he's implying, but the way he says it makes you ten times as desperate for his touch.

"So?" you say.

"The whole point of this is to keep you awake," he says. "I don't think I can make you come in good conscience, George. Besides, if you come in the nether your dick will explode."

You narrow your eyes at him, and he starts snickering.

"So, what, are you just planning to tease me?"

"I prefer to call it making out," Dream says, and that doesn't sound so bad, so you pull him back in for more kissing.

He takes charge just like before. It feels nice to be beneath him, to have his hands on your waist. You keep squirming, trying to press against him, but it doesn't work. He won't let you grind no matter how hard you try to open your legs around his waist.

And eventually, he pulls back.

"We should keep moving," he says. You groan, annoyed about it, but you sit up anyway.

"You are so rude," you scold him, and he feigns innocence, pouting at you.

"What did I do?"

"You know exactly what you did," you grumble, adjusting yourself. You eye the front of his pants, wondering if he's denying himself pleasure too. The bulge you see there makes you feel a little better.

After a few minutes of walking, you come to a valley full of ghostly grey fire, and Dream breathes a sigh of relief.

"We're here," he says. "Get me some of the sand."

You take one more step forwards, and your foot, the one without a gold boot, sinks into the ground. You struggle to pull it back out, but the sand tugs at you like it wants to keep you. You almost don't want to touch it.

And then you hear a sound, desolate and lonesome. It tears at your heart. You look up at Dream, whose face has turned grim.

"What is that?" you ask.

"A ghastr," he says.

"Shouldn't we help it?"

He shakes his head. You sigh, and stick your hands into the ground to get a handful of sand. It's very smooth, very fine. It smells like rotten eggs and wood smoke. Your eyes are stinging.

There's a screech. You lift your shield and deflect a fireball headed straight for Dream, scattering sand all over.

"Thanks," he says, knocking an arrow in his bow and taking aim.

He shoots the ghastr out of the sky.

"It was crying," you say. "Why was it crying?"

This place is getting to you. It's so foreign, so horrible.

Dream shrugs.

"No one knows why ghastrs cry. They just do."

"I hate it here," you say tiredly.

"We have the fire now," he reminds you, holding up a torch with what looks like half-melted sand on the end. The fire is grey. "That means we can start heading back."

Right. Even relief feels heavy here. All it means is more walking.

A while later, Dream turns to you.

"I think I messed up," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"I got us turned around a little bit. Not too badly, but..."

"Just spit it out."

"We might have to go through that fortress to get back to the portal."

You stagger. Dream catches you.

"Why can't we just go around?" you ask, and your voice is almost pleading.

"It's the best way to cross the lava lake," he explains. "The lake is much wider than the fortress. Going through is the best way back if we don't want to run out of food."

"Alright," you sigh, linking your sword arm with his for support.

The enchantment on your shared pair of boots has been failing recently. The magic treads look worn down. It makes you stumble more often.

But you keep plodding forward as a terrible fortress looms in the distance.

The halls of the fortress are creepier than the bastion was, probably because you know everything here wants to kill you and there is no way to make them neutral instead. There's a clatter from somewhere, and you raise your shield nervously.

"Keep moving," Dream says, and he looks so at home here, like he's in his element. "These things are all built the same way, basically. We just have to keep heading this direction and upwards, and we'll find our way out. We won't have to worry about the worst monsters until--"

The clatter is louder now, and getting closer, and you turn to see a blackened skeleton with a sword moving towards you. It's quicker than the cave monsters were. You cower behind your shield and cry out for Dream. There's more clattering, a thunk, and then,

"It's dead."

You open your eyes. There's a charred lump of coal, a single blackened bone, and a stone sword shimmering with something oily. You look up at Dream. His shield has a deep black mark in it, and the blackness is spreading slowly further into the wood.

"Look," you say. He flips the shield around and breathes in sharply.

"Right," he says. "Don't let them hit you. There's something on that sword..."

You pick it up by the hilt. It smells of rot.

"Will this be better at killing things because of whatever they put on it?"

Dream nods grimly, so you tuck the iron sword into your belt and hold the other one instead.

"We're getting closer to the center. Keep an eye out."

You keep walking. At one point, you nearly stab a pig zombie, but you realise just in time and pull up. The zombie doesn't seem to register the near hostility, blinking at you with dead eyes. It oinks. Its ear twitches.

"Are these things even alive?" you ask Dream, and he shrugs.

"Enough to feel pain," he says. "Isn't that what matters?"

You swallow. This place is really affecting you. It's hard to feel even a shred of empathy for these creatures, so different from you, with their rotting pink skin and pitted flesh. With their half-exposed skulls, with how they're missing one ear, with the snuffling sound of breath through their snouts.

You set down the sword and reach out a hand to the pigman. It looks at your hand, and then back at you. Its grimy gold sword glints dully in the firelight.

Whether because it doesn't know what the gesture means, or because it doesn't trust you, it doesn't reach a hand out in turn, and you pick your sword back up. You and Dream move on.

You come to a room with a small pool of lava in the center, and Dream stops. You stop too, looking to him for guidance, and he lifts a finger to his lips.

You nod.

"Past here is where the blazes spawn," he says, and you think of fish in a river. "They're dangerous. They shoot fireballs, but they can also hit you from up close. Keep your shield up, and keep your distance."

You ready your shield, and the two of you slowly set off through the room.

The halls are open now. You wonder if the nether has a sky, or if it just goes on and on vertically as well. It wouldn't surprise you if it were endless in all directions.

There's a clattering. Three of those charred-looking skeletons stand guard up ahead. You breathe in sharply. One of them shambles in your direction, as if patrolling, and then it spots you and begins to run. You remind yourself to breathe, and keep your eyes open this time.

You manage to get in a hit with the stone sword. There's a cry from Dream as the skeleton knocks his shield aside just as a fireball hurtles towards him, and then Dream is on fire, he's burning, what should you do? He takes off running down the hall, and you follow.

"I'll be okay," he calls. "We just need to get out of here."

You duck under a slash from one of those awful skeletons, and come face to face with a terrifying orange creature that you can infer must be a blaze. You scramble backwards as Dream plunges forwards, and then he's on a balcony with four blazes surrounding him, and you have one skeleton before you and two to your back, and you've been separated.

"George, come on!" Dream shouts, but you're so busy holding off the skeletons, too afraid of the blazes to take your chances with them. Out of the frying pan, as they say.

A moment later, though, Dream cries out in pain, and you don't even hesitate, ramming one skeleton with your shield, kicking the kneecap off another, and stabbing the last. You take one final lukewarm breath at the base of the stairs, and then ready your shield and your sword. Sweat dripping down your forehead, you leap into fire.

Dream is cornered, but you slash clean through a blaze and watch as it shrivels up into blackened pieces, withering away before your eyes. Dream presses the advantage from the other side, and you meet in the middle, pressing your back to his and holding up your battered shield as more blazes appear.

"Let's get out of here," you shout, and you hear a blast as he shifts behind you.

"On three," he says, and just then--

A squeal. You flinch, because it's just like when you were little and you hated fall since it meant butchering pigs and you would hide under a pillow with your ears plugged up tight so you wouldn't have to hear them screaming.

Snuffling and snorting, and you have to blink to comprehend what you're seeing. At least ten pigmen, eyes alight with malice, all piling onto a single blaze, which must have hit one of them with a fireball. You and Dream retreat together, watching as another blaze shoots into the crowd of pigmen, and they start going after both blazes.

You hear the death cry of a blaze, and then shortly afterwards you hear it again. Suddenly, the pigmen are back to their slow, shuffling selves, dead eyes void of any intelligence. You shudder, creeped out.

"Let's go," you whisper. Dream nods. The two of you climb down the broken end of the hall and back onto the squishy land you're used to.

You never thought you'd feel relieved to walk on flesh.

"Our portal is close, just up the ridge," Dream says. "You probably saved my life back there."

"You said you'd be fine," you scold him, and he looks down.

"I lied," he admits. "I didn't want you to slow down for me. I just wanted you to make it."

"You're an idiot," you say, pulling him into your arms and holding on tight. "You should have some of that soup you gave me earlier, is there any left?"

He slumps into your embrace and mumbles,

"In my bag, yeah."

You find the soup and sit down, cradling him in your arms. He's lanky enough that it's a little bit awkward, but you hold the bowl for him to drink from, and he starts to look better, less beat up. Less burnt.

"Thank you," he says quietly, leaning his head on your chest, eyes shut. "I love you."

Your heart stutters.

"I love you too," you say. "We should get going. No sleeping in the nether."

Dream yawns, and nods, stumbling to his feet. He helps you up too.

You're so glad to nearly be out of this place.

The sight of the portal doesn't unsettle you anymore, and more than anything else that's happened here, that makes you realise this place has changed you.

But you're alive, and so is Dream.

You sit on the edge of the portal together and wait for it to send you home.

The soul fire makes your whole house smell like that awful place, but you're so glad to be back that you don't even care. Dream brings in snow to melt over the fire as the sun begins to sink, and both of you bathe. You're glad to scrub off the soot and sulfur, not to mention the sand that's somehow gotten everywhere. It feels nice to be clean, like you're fully human again.

You pull Dream into bed with you, and he wraps you up in his arms. You fall asleep to the rhythm of his breathing.

And again, you wake up warm, cradled in Dream's arms. You try to get up, and he groans at you, holding you tighter. You shove at his arms, exasperated.

"Dream, let me up, I have to put wood on the fire and fix the chimney cover or we'll freeze to death anyway after all that."

"Soul fire doesn't need fuel," he tells you, fingers brushing your jaw, like a hint at dominance.

"Well I-- I still need to fix the chimney--"

He kisses you on the cheek, and you trail off, swallowing hard. The entire length of your body is pressed against his, and you notice now that he's half-hard, cock pressing against your leg.

"Oh," you murmur, putting a hand on the back of his head and guiding him to kiss your neck. You gasp as he starts nibbling, and say, "Alright, I guess I can stay a little longer."

"Good boy," he says against your skin. You swallow, grinding your hips forwards and groaning when he rolls you onto your back and stays atop you. "Tell me what you want."

"You should fuck me," you tell him, and his mouth spreads into an eager grin.

"It would be my pleasure," he says. He grinds down, like a preview of what he intends to do to you, and your head tilts backwards as you groan. He takes advantage of your exposed neck to bite you, and you gasp, tugging on his hair.

"Dream," you murmur.

"You sound so good," he says, kissing your neck. "You wanna be good for me, George?"

You swallow.

"Yes please," you whimper. "What can I do, what do you like?"

"Well, I love kissing you," he says, stealing a kiss. "I like to look at you, and touch you. I like

when you make those sounds for me."

He pushes your shirt up your waist, and you sigh softly as he moves down your body to kiss your stomach.

"I like how soft you are here," he says, squeezing gently, and you squirm, giggling a little bit and shoving his hands away.

"Ah, no, that tickles, Dream."

He puts his hands back on your stomach and you tense up in preparation, but he doesn't tickle this time.

"I like exploring you."

Your shirt is pushed all the way up now, so it doesn't surprise you when Dream shifts his focus upwards to your nipples. He licks one, watching you to see your reaction, and you hum at him softly, petting his hair.

"I'm not very sensitive there," you inform him, and he smirks.

"Where are you sensitive?" he asks, head tilting to the side inquisitively.

"I thought you wanted to explore," you quip. "If I tell you, that'll take all the fun out of it."

He laughs, and it's beautiful.

"You seemed to like it when I was marking your neck," he muses, moving back upwards to softly kiss you there. You breathe in sharply, because that tickles a little bit too, but not so much that you can't slide your hands down his back to rest just above his ass and say,

"That's not exploring."

He squares his shoulders and lifts his head to let the eye markings on his mask face you.

"You want me to explore?"

"Of course I do," you say, pressing him closer, and you get to watch his lips part as his cock rubs against your thigh through two layers of clothing.

"You might not like it," he warns you. "I plan to be pretty thorough. You won't accuse me of teasing?"

You smirk, and press your thigh upwards between his legs.

"I make no promises, Dream."

He groans, and takes a handful of hair on the back of your neck, not pulling, just letting you know that he could.

"I want you to be good for me," he says, voice gravelly, and your breath stutters in your throat. "I want you to be patient, George, can you do that? I want to learn every inch of your body, and I want you to let me."

You suppress a whimper, and instead of responding to that (it makes your head *spin*, and the arousal it inspires in you is too overwhelming to acknowledge) you ask,

"What on earth is an inch?"

"That's not important," Dream says. "Will you be good for me?"

And he's pushing, now, turning the conversation back around and making you acknowledge what he's doing to you. You shut your eyes as a shudder runs down your spine, and you say,

"I- I can try. But really, Dream, I make no promises."

"Good boy," he whispers in your ear, and you buck your hips up against him with a whimper.

"Yes," you breathe. "Please, Dream, I want to be good. Tell me I'm good."

He's touching your shoulder now, moving your arm and feeling the joint with his fingers as it shifts. Like it's not what he expected, like his body works differently.

"Keep being so sweet for me and you won't ever have to ask me to say it," he says. "Of course you're good, George, laying here so pretty for me. Tell me how you feel."

"Safe," you murmur, as he traces fingers down your arm.

"This is the spot that hurt a lot when you banged it on the rock," he says, tapping your elbow, and you snort at the phrasing.

"Funny bone," you say. "It doesn't hurt so much as it just feels really, really weird."

"Will you bend your arm for me?"

Feeling silly for liking the order so much, you bend your arm, loving the way Dream's touch follows the movement.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm seeing where you're different," he says. "I don't know how far you can bend or stretch, I need to know so I won't hurt you."

You pull him into a kiss for that.

"Dream, can you please touch me now?" you ask, when he pulls away to go back to studying your arm, and he sighs, putting a hand on your chin to tilt your head back. You let out a surprised groan, mouth falling open, and your back arches.

"You told me you would try to be patient for me," he says.

"I *am* trying," you whine. "It's just hard, I don't want to sit around while you play with my wrist, I want you to fuck me. We don't actually have all day, I still need to fix the chimney."

Dream chuckles, and pats your cheek, letting go of your chin.

"I don't know how you can still think about chores right now. You're all I have room for in my brain, George."

You swallow, heart skipping a beat, and cover up how good it felt to hear that with a challenge,

"Well maybe you need to do a better job distracting me."

The jaw of his mask clicks shut, and you shiver at how intimidating it makes him look. You remember seeing him for the first time from across the river, when you were afraid of him.

He has you at his mercy now. He takes your hand and spreads your fingers out, and you swallow, shutting your eyes. His touch is light, but deliberate, and it does honestly feel nice to be touched this way, like every last part of you is worthy of attention. You just can't stop thinking about how hard you are.

He switches to your other arm, and you groan, sort of annoyed, as he looks at your shoulder and then moves down to your elbow. His fingers dance along the crease in your skin there, and you gasp. There's a pause, and a click, and then teeth on that spot, gentle as he takes your skin in his teeth and bites down slowly.

"Ah," you cry out, back arching, and you have no reason to be so sensitive there, but for some reason you are. "Ah, *ah*, Dream."

You hear him chuckle as he releases your skin, and then you feel his tongue, warm and wet and driving lightning through your nerves. You whimper.

"Good boy," he says, kissing a path from your elbow to your wrist. He kisses your palm, and then each of your fingertips, and you sigh, catching his face in your hand and patting his cheek. "So patient for me. Take these off."

He tugs on the waistband of your leather pants, and you slide out of them, dropping them off the side of the bed. You're exposed now. The chill air gives you goosebumps.

He starts to move further down the bed and you tense, drawing your legs up towards your chest.

"Don't touch my feet," you tell him, as one of his hands closes around your ankle. "I hate when people touch my feet."

"Okay," he says, hand moving the other direction instead, and you breathe a sigh of relief, unbending your knees to lie flat again. He ends up lifting one of them back up anyway, propping your ankle up on his shoulder. You open your eyes to see him reaching for the spot behind your knee, and you close them again out of reflex because you know you're sensitive there, and you don't want to have to look at him while he makes you squirm and whimper some more.

Your hips buck as his fingers brush your skin. You can't stand it, the way it makes your stomach feel like liquid, like all your muscles are leaves.

"Stop teasing me," you beg, grabbing the sheets, head thrown back as you arch up towards him. "Dream, *please*."

"Be patient," he reminds you, and you groan, frustrated. He touches your inner thigh, and you choke on your breath, hips bucking.

"Please, Dream. I can't, I can't do it. I need you."

"Be good for me, George."

His voice is scolding, and you heave a desperate sigh, cock hard against your stomach, leaking precum. He has you bent nearly in half, hands on your leg, and you can hardly stand it.

"I can't. I'm sorry, I can't, I can't, I can't--"

Fingertips on your stomach, on either side of your cock. You go quiet, rolling your hips up to try and convince him.

He sets your leg down, no longer over his shoulder.

"Spread your legs for me, George."

You do so, opening your eyes to look at him. He's licking his lips, face right by your stomach, and you see your cock twitch in response.

"So pretty," he tells you, hands sliding down your thighs and back up. You squirm. "You look so good down here."

"Please," you say again.

"I thought you were my good boy," he says, and you cover your face with your hands.

"I am," you insist, but it feels more like pleading. "I'm trying, I promise. You're being so mean, Dream."

A kiss to your stomach, just above the tip of your cock, and you sob.

"Poor sweet thing," he says. "So desperate for me you can't wait a second longer. You look so good like this, George, you sound so perfect begging."

"I sound even better coming," you tell him, and he laughs. "I can show you."

"Don't worry, I plan to see for myself," he says, and you shiver. "Turn over for me."

You swallow, and turn onto your stomach. Is he going to examine your entire back now before he finally moves on? You hope not. You probably couldn't stand it.

His hands are sure and steady on your ass, and it feels good to have him finally focus on something important. He spreads you, and you hide your face in your pillow, muffling a pathetic whimper. It's stupid how slow he's going.

He lets go, and you want to punch him, but if you lift your head from the pillow he'll be able to hear how desperate you are. You stay hidden.

You hear a rustle, and then a warm fluid lands on your skin, pooling in the dip at the small of your back. You peek over your shoulder to see Dream tucking a small bottle into his pocket. He smiles when he sees you looking.

"What is that?" you ask him.

"Slick," he says, "To help me open you up. Stay still."

He gathers some onto his fingers from the little puddle on your back, and you tuck your head back into your arms, muffling yourself in the pillow again just to prepare.

"Relax."

You take a deep breath. Dream's fingers are warm, and he's so gentle you don't feel all that nervous despite never having done this with someone else before. You just want him to start. He slides down the crack between your cheeks, making you shudder, and then back up.

"Please," you say into the pillow. You don't know if he can hear you, but on his next pass back down, he presses on your entrance, not enough to breach it, but enough to make you wish he would.

"You look so good right now, George," he murmurs. "I wish you could see yourself. Such a good boy for me."

"Please, Dream," you say, lifting your head just enough to say it louder.

"Beg," he tells you, and you groan, frustrated.

"Please," you repeat. "I want you so badly, you just keep teasing and not following through, I can't stand it. Please just keep going, just fuck me."

Dream groans softly, and then his fingertip slides into you.

"Yes," you gasp. "Yes, that's-- oh, that's nice, please don't stop."

"Tell me how it feels."

You breathe in deep, and let it out as a sigh.

"I need more," you tell him quietly. "Please, I'll tell you if it hurts, please just give me more."

"Good boy."

His finger slides in further, and you press your hips back, eyes slipping shut.

"Stay still," he says, shoving your hips down, and you gasp, because that makes you feel dominated, like he owns you.

"Okay, yes, I'll be good. Please give me another finger."

He adds another.

"Are you just going to beg every second until I fuck you?"

"Please," you say wryly, and he chuckles at you. "Dream, I can handle a third."

He listens to you and adds a third, and now the stretch is enough to take your breath away, enough to nearly wreck you. He says something to you, but you can't answer, can't focus with his fingers invading the most sensitive part of you. Slowly, you manage to focus.

"So pretty for me, George. So good, you're so needy--"

"I love you," you gasp, because you need to hear him say it back, and he goes quiet for a moment.

"I love you too, George," he says, and you let all the tension leave your shoulders, going pliant for him. "I love you, I just want to make you feel good."

"It feels amazing," you tell him, hips twitching because you want to grind, but he's told you to stay still. "Can you please fuck me now?"

He pulls his fingers out, and you almost cuss him out for it, but then you feel his touch on your back, scooping up some of the lube he put there. There's a rustle of clothing, and then a slick sound, and you gasp. He's--

Something warm and blunt presses against your entrance, but not enough to actually enter, and you scramble for a grip on the sheets, pressing back against him.

"Oh, please," you gasp.

"You're ready, George?"

"Yes, I'm ready, please just fuck me--"

He thrusts in, and you groan helplessly, eyes going out of focus, lips parting.

"Good boy," he groans, and you don't think you'll ever get tired of hearing that. "George, you feel so good around me, you're perfect."

You squeeze your eyes shut and hug your pillow.

"Feels so good," you tell him. "Oh, Dream. Please, please move, I can take it, I need it."

He leans down and kisses the back of your neck, then whispers,

"I think you should turn over. I want to see your face."

You don't bother asking how he sees, because now is not the time. He pulls out, and you flip over, not caring about the oil on your back and the stain it's going to put on the sheets. It's so much better to face him, to have his arms around you, to be able to tuck your head in against his neck and hide your face that way, instead of in a pillow. You cling to him as he lines back up, and then maybe this was a mistake, because it's a lot harder to muffle yourself now, as he thrusts in and your mouth opens in a high, keening sound.

"Dream," you gasp. "More, please, more."

His mouth is open, lips parted, and he captures your lips in a kiss as he fucks you, swallowing the sounds you make so you don't have to be so embarrassed. He looks so smug, so glad to be doing this, like he's drinking in everything you do, memorising this to think about later. And that makes you feel so wanted it almost hurts. You've never felt this way before.

"I love you," you say again, and he kisses your forehead, hands shifting to your hips so he can fuck you faster.

"I love you, George, you're so good for me."

You groan as he speeds up, back arching, and he's hitting so deep you know you'll have to deal with nausea later, but it's worth it. It feels so good right now that you don't even care.

He brushes against the spot within you that makes everything into fireworks, and you sob, holding him tighter as you come right up against the edge.

"Please touch me," you gasp. "I'm close, so close--"

He lands another thrust just off from your sweet spot. You groan, half frustrated and half relieved, because even though your instincts tell you it'll feel better if he hits it head on, you know from experience that it'll actually just hurt. You always have trouble making this feel good for yourself, because you have to remember to stay around that spot instead of going right for it, and a lot of the time you forget in a moment of bliss and then ruin everything.

Dream's hand is on your stomach. Everything else in the world flickers away, and you look into the

eye markings on his mask, and then down at his lips.

"Please," you repeat, as he pulls out slightly in preparation to thrust again. His hand wraps around your cock and squeezes gently, and then moves, sliding upwards, you feel it in slow motion, as he's thrusting back in and sighing your name and brushing past that spot from the other side, and you're coming, watching his face as he watches you, clinging to him with arms around his waist. It feels so intimate to be watched in this way, to have your eyes open while you come. You feel your entire body tensing with it, and then it leaves, and you still feel full, you still feel warm, you still feel Dream watching without eyes.

He pulls out, and his hand moves to himself. You swallow, and reach down to help him, fingers tangling with his, intertwining around his cock as you pump up and down. His mouth is far open now, and he's grunting like he doesn't know what else to do with the air inside his lungs. He gives a shaky moan, dropping his head on your shoulder, and you get to feel him twitch in your hand as he comes, you get to feel it land, warm and wet, on your stomach.

A few minutes later, you get to see him smile bashfully as he brings over a wet cloth to wipe you off. You get to pull him in for a kiss. You get to tell him,

"I love you."

You get to see his smile widen as he says it back.

"Dream, I was wondering, what... what are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, I'm just curious, but are you human?"

He takes a long time to answer.

"Enough to love you," he finally says, and you sigh softly and pull him into your arms.

"That's what matters," you tell him, and he wraps his arms around your waist to hold on tight.

Chapter End Notes

as always with my smut, if ur under 18 years of age, please don't comment. i am aware that younguns know what sex is, this is just a personal boundary of mine, so pls don't cross it

let me know if you liked this! comments help me fight depression

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

it's here!!!!

warning this chapter contains themes of self harm/mutilation, death, depersonalisation, and multiple past suicide attempts (sort of, its complicated). however, i can promise that it also has a happy ending.

this chapter isnt as good as the first one as far as plot and narrative structure go, so if i were a professional writer and i planned to make this fic a huge story i would just hoard this bit away as something i wrote just to nail down dream's character.

fortunately though, im not a professional writer XD

this is all im going to write of this AU because i have to show my other projects some love, but if this fic inspires you, feel free to write fanfiction of a fanfiction XD if anyone wants to continue this fic just let me know that youre over 18, list this fic as the inspiration when you post, and ill approve the thingy to make the site link your fic from this one.

background info:

[cornflower](#). only the first sentence of the section i linked is relevant, im not using it as a n*zi symbol here (fun fact, cornflowers were used that way in austria in the 1930s! great flower choice, notch!)

[edge of the minecraft world](#) yes i did math about it, please dont question the numbers. fun fact: if you go into the nether at the edge of the world, you can travel further within the nether, because the nether boundary is the same distance from spawn as the overworld boundary. however, once you leave the nether, your portal will be within the world boundary, relatively close to the first portal no matter how far you travelled. i tested this in creative mode in 1.15.2

i was going to link the guardian wiki page too but i had to edit out that part cus apparently when someone told me guardians had a telekinetic laser beam back in 2015 they were lying and that's never been a thing. i believed them and continued to believe them until today despite raiding an ocean monument all by myself in the meantime and seeing multiple videos of people being able to move just fine while targeted by guardians. smh. sighhhh. i'm gonna go sulk now.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

You're honestly sort of fond of this specific human. You've only been watching him for a day and a half, but he sings when he thinks he's alone and he has a funny voice. His vowels are shaped differently than you expect.

And there's something that's different about him. He's not like the ones in the villages. He wears a teal shirt and uses different hands for different things, which is weird for a human. They usually use the same hand for everything as you, but he doesn't. He writes with the other hand, but chops wood with the right one. It's funny, and you haven't figured it out all the way yet. You need to

watch more before you'll know.

You're a little less careful as you watch him right now, counting on the river to cover up any noise, but then he seems to feel you watching and looks up at you.

It's like a guardian's stare. Like he could knock you flat with just his eyes.

You've always viewed that as a stupid vulnerability, the way you can always tell where a human is looking. But maybe there's power in it too, in the imposition of their gaze on those they watch.

You swallow. How long does he intend to hold you here? Night is falling, and his dark eyes are wide. He looks nice when he's surprised. You can see him tremble as his hold on you slowly loosens. You turn and bound away, distracted as the trees fly by.

He saw you. Humans *never* see you.

His voice is so fun. He tries to talk to you the next time you visit (the next day), asking why you're here and what you want. You aren't quite ready to let him hear you, though. Any other human, you'd use your voice readily, maybe play some pranks, but there's something different about this one.

So you don't answer.

You lead him a little ways into the woods. A surface creeper goes for you, and you ignore it, watching behind you to see how he deals with it. He doesn't really pause, just chops it with his axe as he passes.

"Where are you leading me?"

You decide you need a name for him. You pick River for now, since he saw you by the river.

River has his arms crossed, and he's glaring at you in a way that makes you freeze again for a moment. Woah.

You point at his basket and then deeper into the woods. He sighs, and stops glaring, setting you free. You lead him a few feet further, and then stop at a stand of snowdrops. They only bloom in springtime for a few days, and you want him to see them.

"Why did you stop?"

Is he joking?

You pick a snowdrop and hold it out to him, and he raises an eyebrow.

"Nice flower."

You lean over and drop it in his basket. He rolls his eyes, and turns on his heel to leave the forest.

...Oh.

Okay.

(You don't understand why that hurts so much)

Later that evening, he flinches when he spots you in the trees by his house. He was *looking*. Why would he look if he didn't want to see you?

He's nervous. It's really easy to tell with humans, because they broadcast everything so loudly.

Maybe you're scaring him. He seems afraid of you. You aren't trying to be creepy, it just feels nice to be near someone. To...

This is a bad idea. It's going to hurt so much when you die.

But you think he's interesting, and no one has spoken to you in so long. You like it when he looks at you. It feels good to be seen.

People usually don't see you, and at this point you don't even know if it's because you like it that way.

You swing down out of your tree and creep closer to his door. He swallows, and backs up, reaching for his axe, propped up against the wall. Definitely nervous.

You don't know what to do. It's hard to think with him looking at you. He's tense, hands shaking, and you realise that maybe you're scaring him so bad he can't move. You bite your lip behind your mandible, tilting your head to the side, and he breathes in sharply, but doesn't move.

Yeah. Definitely scaring him pretty bad.

You sit back on your heels and turn your back to him, still watching, but he doesn't know that. His breath steadies after a moment, and when he moves, it's fast, jerky.

Your fault. Whoops.

He goes inside his house and shuts the door.

So the next day, you bring an excuse and a snack with you. String, and slime, to weave into rope. Berries to eat. You sit up in a tree near his house, the same one as last night, and start weaving as you wait for him to wake up.

He checks your tree as soon as he walks out, and you really hate the fear on his face. You're getting tired of it.

He doesn't even wait to see what you're doing, he just waves his arms and shouts,

"Hey!"

You flinch, and drop your pot of goop. It shatters on the ground, spilling slime everywhere.

"What are you doing here? Get out, go away! Leave me alone!"

You jump down out of the tree to land in a crouch by the mess of slime and pottery shards. It's sort of salvageable. You get a new pot out of your bag and scoop slime into it with your fingers: just the on-top stuff, nothing that's touched the ground.

You don't realise how close he's getting.

"Get out of here!"

He's stomping, and you're lower than him, and he has an axe. You leap for the tree trunk and climb up it one-handed, careful not to spill any of your remaining slime as you scramble back up to your perch, gather your string, and then climb higher.

Annoyed, you settle back into weaving your rope.

"Go away!" he calls out, and you ignore him. "What even is this stuff, your snot? Gross! Get away from my house!"

You aren't actually sure what snot is.

"Why are you even here?"

You just keep weaving, trying very hard not to think about the things he's said as you let the rope hang down from your tree as you weave it to dry in the wind. You were waiting a while before he came out, so it already hangs almost to the ground.

You only realise this is a bad thing when a sharp tug on the other end topples you from your perch.

You land on your side. River has the other end of your rope in his hand. Annoyed, you let go of your end and cross your arms, turning your back on him. It was for him anyway, but he could have at least waited until you were finished.

"Seriously, what are you doing here?"

Without turning back, you grab the rope closer to his end and give it a yank. He lets go, and you find the unfinished end and go back to weaving.

"Why are you doing that? Why won't you just go somewhere else, it's creepy. Leave me alone."

You hunch your shoulders and duck your head, hands faltering. Why is he acting this way?

"There's literally no reason you should have to do that right by me. Just go away! These woods are *huge*."

You turn back to face him, and he flinches, breathing in sharply as he rears back. You tilt your head down.

"Stop that, I refuse to feel guilty," he says. "I don't know what you are, you could be dangerous. Leave me alone."

You're starting to get sort of angry. Abruptly, like an enderman attacking, you stand and take hold of his shoulder. He gasps, going pale, eyes wide, and tries to pull away, so you adjust your grip, hooking your elbow around the back of his neck and gripping the other shoulder. There.

You point at your face, and then at his.

This is why you think I'm dangerous.

He doesn't seem to get it, so you imitate an elder guardian's cry.

You're only scared because I don't look human.

Somehow, his eyes go wider. You still don't think he gets it.

Frustrated, you let go of his shoulder, plant a hand in the middle of his chest, and give him a shove.

It feels good. He stumbles back, trembling, and you turn on your heel, emptying your pouch of berries over your shoulder just to show him what you would have shared with him if he weren't such a jerk.

You escape into the trees.

After that horrible morning, you tell yourself you'll never watch that human again. He's mean, and he shouted at you, and he clearly doesn't want you around.

But you miss him. You miss his voice and the way he moves, and it's just so hard to stop thinking about him.

You try to imitate his voice, so you can keep it with you.

"Go away."

Not quite. It's all in the vowels. He does something so strange with them.

"Get out of here!"

This isn't working. You'll need to hear it more before you'll be able to copy it whenever you like. That's the only reason you can do it with the other sounds, because you've heard them so many times.

Two days later, you end up going back.

You stay hidden better this time. He's chopped down the tree you were in before, so you stay absolutely still in some brush near his house. He doesn't notice you at first. He gets partway through a song before he sees you.

"With what shall I sharpen-- hey, I see you. I told you to go away."

He doesn't look as angry today, so you tentatively peek your head out from behind the bushes.

"I think I get what you meant the other day."

He looks down at his hands, and then back up at you, and you keep watching him.

"That I'm just scared of you because you've got that creepy mask on and you don't talk."

You tilt your head, and he flinches. Ugh. That's getting really old.

"Why are you here?"

You keep still, and he eventually heaves a sigh and goes back to his work, planting potatoes. He keeps on singing, a simple song about sharpening tools or something, and you listen, trying to memorise his voice. You don't know how long he'll let you stay here before he decides to hate you again.

"The other day."

He said it strangely, though.

"The othaw day."

No, not like that. You're perched up in the top of a red mushroom to sleep, and as you wait for night, you practice his voice.

You've never been as good at people impressions, but you just want to figure out all of the different things he does when he speaks and learn how to do them yourself. That's all. You don't need a perfect copy of his voice at your disposal, you just...

You don't want your voice to give him another thing to worry about when you talk. You don't want to unsettle him any further. And if your reaction to his voice is any indication, the difference between the two of you is actually pretty drastic.

"The otha day."

That was closer. You think he just skips a lot of his R sounds.

"Scaed."

You snicker, because it sounds funny, but you think you're doing it right.

There's still a lot of differences you haven't figured out, but you've gotten closer tonight.

River gets up early the next day, and he's already out in the garden as you near his house. You freeze. Has he noticed you? You don't think you're close enough for him to have heard your footsteps, because you are very good at being quiet.

He's looking up. Shoot.

"Hello?" he calls, peering into the woods in your direction.

You don't want to answer. You want him to just give it up and assume it was nothing. You don't feel like showing yourself today.

"I know you're there. Stop hiding."

Crap.

Reluctantly, you slink out of the woods, keeping everything but your head hidden behind the trunk of a tree.

He *flinches* again.

You can't deal with this today. You just can't. You're tired of feeling guilty every time he looks at you. You duck back behind the tree and pull the hood of your shirt down so that it no longer covers your hair.

"What are you doing?"

You undo the laces that keep the hood attached to your collar, and then flip it around. By this time, River has come over.

"I didn't know you had hair," he says as you lace your hood on backwards and pull it up to cover your face. "Oh. Wait, you don't have to--"

You put a finger to his lips, and they part in confusion. Then you point back at his garden, and he sighs, lowering his gaze to the ground.

"Alright. I'll get back to work."

And you watch. And if your breathing isn't as steady as it usually is, he isn't close enough anymore to notice.

He said *alright* with the R sound, but both vowels were strange. You take some time to play with them after sunset that night, and eventually you get them to sound right.

Maybe soon you can talk to him.

You keep your hood on backwards until a few days later, when he looks at you with frustration on his face and reaches out to pull the hood down.

He looks right into your face without flinching this time, and his expression only gets more determined. You're frozen. He never wants to see you, so why has he looked now?

"Why are you hiding from me?" he demands. You wish you were human just so you could glare at him.

The two of you are crouching in his garden, piling dirt around the young potato plants, but your hands have stopped moving. He notices, and says,

"You don't have to show your face if you don't want to."

He's less sure of himself now. He looks at your face the same way you've listened to his voice, like he wants to memorise it (like he wants to see it), and then reaches back out.

"Here."

He puts the hood back up.

"Is that better?"

You swallow. Your hands have started trembling, and you still haven't figured out how to move again.

"Are you okay?"

You nod, because at least that's easy, and he smiles.

Oh, he smiles, and your lungs forget how to breathe. You smile back behind your outer jaw, because you can't help it, even though he can't see it, even though your hood and your jaw are both in the way.

He's stopped staring, but he's still smiling, and after a moment you remember what you're doing and go back to putting soil around the plants.

He's so beautiful that it's impossible not to watch him. You garden entirely by feel, because all of your focus is directed at his face. You're good at doing things without watching your hands, so it isn't very hard.

"Do you eat?" he asks later, sun low in the sky, and you nod. "What do you like to eat?"

You dust the soil off your hands and reach into your bag to show him some mushrooms.

"Oh? I like baked potatoes better. Are mushrooms your favourite?"

You almost shake your head, but--

He's asking, so maybe he truly wants to know? But he often looks even when he doesn't want to see you.

He looked right at you today and didn't show any fear.

Slowly, you nod, and he smiles at you again, smaller than before, but it still makes your heart swell with panic just like the first time.

"Alright. Are you good at finding mushrooms, then? I swear I never can. The huge mushrooms don't count, they frighten me. They're far too big for comfort."

You laugh at him, and he looks almost delighted to be laughed at, as if he's not even offended. You nod, and he leans back. You see the boulder, but this is his yard, so you assume he knows it's there.

Apparently not, though. His elbow slams the edge of it, and he cries out, grasping it with his opposite hand and making a face. You tilt your head curiously.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he says. "Should've looked behind me."

You laugh again, and he glares at you, but you don't think his heart is in it. He doesn't seem all that annoyed.

Maybe this will turn out okay, you and him. Maybe you won't be forced to move on from this curiosity when he one day decides he's tired of you.

Maybe he finds you just as interesting as you find him.

You're used to being reckless, and the habit is so hard to break that you almost die that night, because you've momentarily forgotten why you don't want to this time. You crouch in the cave, rocks piled around you to keep the monsters away, and struggle to breathe as you dig in your bag for mushrooms and a flower. Your hands are shaking from the pain, but this, at least, you know well.

You drink the soup quickly and slump to the floor, hugging your knees.

You can't believe you forgot about him. You've been so much more careful since you met him, but tonight you forgot and almost threw all of it away.

Maybe it's understandable, since it's been so long since you actually put effort into staying away from risks, but you still hate yourself for it. You have had a fair amount of practice surviving, after all.

The first few times, maybe ten at most, after you confirmed that you started over completely every time you died, you did your best to stay alive. You avoided caves, and got your resources by digging mines. You avoided heights. You avoided the dark. You built structures, adopted animals, wrote books.

You miss those worlds. The first three were the most amazing, because you still put passion into them. By the fourth, you had lost a lot of motivation, and you just went through the motions, rebuilding your favourite things from the previous lives and only occasionally making something new. On the fifth, you travelled without establishing a permanent base and managed to survive almost as long as usual.

In world six, you missed the stability of a permanent home and tried it out again. That was probably the last world you put your heart into, and that was the worst, because you don't even know why you died. You shouldn't have. It was like the world *broke*. You remember going to sleep. You remember rolling out of bed, and not being able to breathe, or see, and then...

Well. That was that.

After a while, you stopped trying to live. At the time, you told yourself it would just be temporary. You would learn about everything that could possibly kill you, because these worlds all have the same basic building blocks and monsters, and you would figure out how to kill it first, or at least how to survive.

And so that's what you did. You died more times than you can remember, to more things than you can list. Eventually you learned about the other realms, the nether and the end, and about the dragon that lives on the other side of those sinister square portals hidden deep underground.

You've gotten very good at killing that dragon. It took a long time to learn how to do it quickly, but it was the deathbed from your sixth world that gave you the idea. By then, you had died a few times to falling asleep in the wrong realm. Eventually, you figured out that if there was a bed near where you fell asleep, the explosion would center the bed and not your skull. Usually this killed you anyway, and it took you several experiments to replicate the discovery, so that the explosion merely woke you up.

The trick was to have something between you and the bed to absorb the explosion.

Most of your deaths are probably from perfecting that method, but you've gotten good at it. It's become a hobby of yours to see how quickly you can kill the dragon after you enter a new world. It gives you something to look forward to after you lose everything.

At least, that's what you were thinking when you started doing it, but you just kept practicing without ever staying long enough in one world to have anything to lose. You stopped caring about the worlds individually and put all your focus into the one thing you always brought with you: yourself. You spent hundreds of worlds just training, just exploring, too afraid to pour any passion into your surroundings because you knew at any moment you could be torn away from them.

It's hard to think about, and usually you try not to, but you've gotten invested again. You've put work into this world, and you hate knowing you'll lose it. You always do.

No matter how long you last, something comes along and kills you. You've gotten very good at surviving, but it never lasts forever. You tried a few more times after you mastered the tactics of fighting monsters, even though you hadn't found any perfect method, and you lost those worlds just like the first ones.

For a moment, you think back to your very first world, before all of this started happening. You knew that world's heart perfectly, because you saw it every time you died. You miss always waking up in the same place after something kills you.

You hate remembering the first home you ever had. You'll never get that stupid little dirt house

back. You'll never see that dumb wall of dyed wool with your face on it ever again. You'll never navigate by those enormous pillars of gravel you built and then jumped off of, confident that you would wake up in the heart of your world again. It's all gone, all lost to you.

Every world you've seen since the crisis has had different colours of grass, but in your first world, all of it was the same luscious green, just a shade off from your skin. Things were simple. Swords were lighter. It was like that world operated on different rules than every single world you've seen since.

It makes you so angry. You have no idea what happened. You didn't even die, you were suddenly just somewhere else.

It took you a long time to come to the conclusion that your old home was gone forever. Every time you died, you woke up somewhere new, and wandered around searching for your house until you died again.

Eventually, you got tired of that. You began to head west every single time you woke up, weary of the endlessness of the world. You had to know if it was truly infinite or not. You died a lot doing that, but after many failed attempts, you travelled for nearly a year from the spot you woke up and encountered a wall of slowly moving diagonal stripes. In the distance, less than a kilometer away, you saw the end of the world.

You think that's what it was. You built upwards to make sure. The plains between were flat and featureless, and you saw the edge of a forest, a few trees, but behind the sparse treeline, there was nothing at all.

You tried many things to cross the boundary. What worked in the end (pun *intended*) was an ender pearl. You threw it, and found yourself on the wrong side of that terrible wall. For a moment, your heart soared with triumph.

That was before you noticed the red edging your vision. You tried to move further anyway, but just past the visible wall was an invisible one. You couldn't cross it even with teleportation.

And just like that, you had a way to find out whether the world was always the same or not.

You began to head north.

Coincidentally, you had to travel nearly another year to find the corner of that wall. As if you were put directly into the center of the world. As if you were the same distance from both sides of the wall when you woke up.

You didn't have a lot of hope after that.

You memorised the terrain, wrote a sign with your name on it, and jumped off a cliff.

The sky is clear tonight as you leave the cave and find a tree to sleep in. You wonder how the same stars always slide across it no matter how many worlds you pass through, and you hate them for making you hope for so long.

You thought there was no way every world could have the same stars.

You were wrong.

The second time you made it to the northwest corner of a world, it was night. You saw the wall glowing in the distance, and the soft buzz of bees nearby gave you hope, because there was a beehive the first time as well. You got out the paper with your drawing of the first corner, which you made as soon as you got to this world. It was your third try after you found the first corner, and you'd made sure to review this drawing over and over again. You had the position of every tree and flower memorised.

You hoped that if this corner was different, it would be different by a lot. You didn't think you'd be able to handle it if the differences were subtle and sinister, if it was similar enough to make you doubt your memory.

There was a rise just before the corner with a pond beneath, same as before, and your heart leapt up into your throat. It looked just like the cliff you jumped off of, only-- it was shorter than it should have been, and the pond at the base was more of a lake.

And on the other side, an ocean.

You dove to the bottom to check for your sign and look at the terrain, just to make sure. Maybe the water level rose in that time.

You found nothing.

The morning passes in a blur, and you don't pay much attention to anything until River touches your shoulder. You flinch, and suddenly your vision ripples into focus.

He's here. He's right in front of you, and he's seen you. That never happens.

It's really going to suck when you die.

"Are you alright?"

After a moment, you shake your head.

"What's wrong?"

He really sounds concerned. You shake your head again, because even if you were ready to speak to him, you wouldn't be able to explain. You've been doing this for too long.

Can you hear me? you want to ask. *Is my voice real? Am I real?*

"How can I help?"

You almost shake your head a third time, but the look on his face is so honest that you can't bear to turn him away. You shrug instead, and sigh, shoulders slumping as you turn your face towards the ground. You notice you're sitting in his garden.

"I found a patch of flowers down the river," he says. "I can show you."

You swallow a scream, and nod your head, standing to follow him. Your movement feels inanimate, like the monsters or the cows or the sheep. Like you don't feel anything past your senses. Like all you know is pain and touch and base pleasure, and the feeling of water on your skin. The feeling of breathing, of eating. Hunger. Exhaustion.

Not sadness, though, and not joy. Just a hollow space where those things would be.

If this is what makes a monster, then that is what you are.

The flowers are blue. There are many of them. Cornflowers. Usually they wait until summer to open. Their petals are fluffy in your hands. River hands one to you, and you take it numbly. The blue is nice. He tucks another behind your ear, and that's when you realise your hood is down, has been down the whole time. Oh, well. River doesn't seem to mind.

You sit, cross-legged, in that patch of flowers with him, until dusk begins to fall like a blanket across the plains. Your head feels clearer. The wind blows through your hair. River yawns.

You are alive right now.

And you are going to have a friend no matter how much it hurts you later.

You practice speaking more often as the days go by. Spring melts fully into summer, blossoming like the flowers in the plains downriver from your friend's house. The two cornflowers he gave you hold their blue for longer than you expect.

He starts following you up into the trees, and in light of that, how can you be expected not to help him when he has trouble going further?

He's beautiful in the treetops. He looks like he belongs up here with you.

You open your mouth, and hesitate. His eyes are sparkling as he looks around, and he freezes you briefly in place when he looks at you and his awe stays put. You swallow hard, and then say,

"What's your name?"

He's surprised to hear you speak. You hope it's not because of your voice. You've spent so long practicing, and you're almost certain you did everything right.

"George," he says.

George. Not River, but that would have been too much of a coincidence anyway, so you don't mind.

"I'm Dream," you tell him. It's the first time you've said your name out loud.

"Do you have a face behind that mask, Dream?" he asks you, and you smirk, tilting your head. Inwardly, you're the opposite of calm. No one has ever said your name before.

What a question.

You've found out before. That was a long time ago, and you no longer remember the pain of sunlight on newly exposed skin. The sight of your reflection in the surface of a pond is but a tattered memory.

You definitely remember the blood, though, and the way it made your head lighter and lighter as it left until you woke up somewhere else, with your real face back on tight. You never tried to take it off again after that.

Having a nose was very strange for the brief time yours was out in the open. You don't miss it. Smelling things is overrated.

(Not to mention the eyes.)

River is waiting for your answer.

You reach out to touch his chest, and feel for a heartbeat, because you have been wondering about this for a while.

"Do you have a heart beneath that skin?"

He gasps. You chuckle at the look on his face.

"Well, yes, of course--"

And you feel it beating. It takes your breath away for a moment.

"But do you ever want anyone to see it?"

The confused frown on his face is just adorable.

"I mean, if-- that would mean I was dead, so no."

"Exactly," you say, hoping he won't ask for more details. He seems creeped out, so you unhinge your outer jaw to show him your mouth, that you can eat and drink and kiss-- or whatever-- just like him. "I can do this though."

"Woah."

The tension is kind of awful. You need a new subject right now.

"Anyway, wanna play tag?"

You like him too much. It's going to kill you when you die. River is preparing for winter, which is sort of a novel concept for you. Ever since you stopped caring, you've just gone ahead and died when winter comes, because the world always begins in spring. It's just... easier.

You aren't actually sure if you remember how to survive the cold. Maybe he'll let you stay with him?

You don't feel ready to lose him yet.

"This way," you tell him, and he heaves a sigh, but keeps on following you. "I promise it's good, George."

"I know, I know, I trust you," he grumbles. "How much further?"

"We're nearly there."

You can hear the buzzing of bees as you grab his hand and tug him into the clearing. A smile beneath your face, you gesture at the bee nests all around.

"Oh!" he says, eyes widening. He smiles. "Wow, Dream, this is great."

You love to see him happy. It just feels... good.

You help him build fires under the nests to gather honey, and afterwards, you wash the stickiness

off in the river together. Something in your core goes all tense seeing him without a shirt on, seeing the trail of hair that leads downwards in the center of his stomach. You try not to look, but it's just so interesting. The only place you have hair is on your head.

You stop looking outside of where your face is pointed, just to remind yourself not to watch him, and it works well enough.

He doesn't put the shirt back on when he gets out. Instead, he climbs up onto the roof of his house and lays down in the sun to dry off.

"Come on," he says to you.

The roof is slippery. He laughs when you almost fall, and you make a rude gesture that makes him laugh even harder.

It's nice to lay down near him. He has a way of letting things be peaceful that you really appreciate. You don't think you'd mind spending the winter with him.

That is, if he lets you.

He begins to invite you inside as the weather gets colder. You don't really feel the cold, but he seems to, and you know from experience that he will stay outside to talk to you if you let him, so you always accept. He makes it cozy.

"What are your plans for winter?" he asks you.

You shrug.

"I don't really have any."

The look on his face would be hilarious if he didn't seem so worried.

"Is it alright if I stay with you?" you ask, and he nods.

"Sure, I was going to offer anyway. You can take the bed."

You shake your head. You haven't used beds since your sixth world.

"Uh, no, I'd rather not. I don't like beds."

"Will you stay tonight?" he asks, and you swallow. It sounds like he's offering--

But you know he isn't. He can't be.

"Tonight?" you echo, and he nods. He looks determined.

"It's going to be especially cold," he tells you. "There aren't any clouds to keep the warmth in."

"Sure," you decide, because it's pretty clear to you that he'll worry if you don't stay. You tilt your head, scoping out the space under his bed. It looks cozy enough, so you get up from the table and climb under it, checking to see if you'll fit.

"What are you doing?"

He's trying not to laugh. You poke your head out.

"I'll sleep here," you tell him. He fails, and starts laughing at you. "It- it's cozy, okay? I like small spaces, I like to be enclosed."

He rolls his eyes at you and hands you a blanket.

"Take this, then," he says. It's soft and fluffy and perfect, and you open your face to show him a smile and rub it against your cheek. It's so soft.

"Wow," you say. "Did you make this?"

"Yes," he says, and you realise that you've made a horrible mistake.

You've fallen in love.

"It seems really warm," you say, focus split between the conversation and the horror of realising how much pain you've signed yourself up for.

"It is," he says. "What did you do for winter last year?"

That was a question. You bite your lip and gather your focus to answer him.

Oh. He wants to know about winter, but this is your first year in this world. You sigh.

"I slept," you say euphemistically. "Usually I sleep. But this year I wanted to see how you humans get through it. That's why I helped you get food before."

"Oh, okay," he says. "Will you be able to stay awake instead of sleeping the whole time?"

You nod.

"Definitely."

"Are you sure you don't want the bed?" he asks you, and you shake your head vehemently.

"No, I hate beds."

He rolls his eyes. You don't think he believes you, but he gets into his bed and blows out the lantern.

"Goodnight, Dream," he says.

"Goodnight."

Winter deepens. One day a cloud appears on the horizon, and River looks hollow the whole day. When the storm arrives near sunset, he goes still, and doesn't make dinner.

You don't mind. You have mushrooms, and bowls, and you can take care of yourself.

You just wish you knew how to take care of him. You try making tea, because he's shivering even though it's cozy in here. He takes the mug from you, and takes a sip.

He spits it right back out, but he's blinking, eyes going back into focus, gaze sharpening until it has the same power as usual. Your shoulders loosen in relief.

He looks so cold. You get partway through a conversation on autopilot, and then he flinches at the sound of the wind. You decide to help him. As long as you don't fall asleep in the bed, it should be

fine, right?

"Are you okay?"

You finish off the tea and climb in next to him with your blanket before you can change your mind.

He stills as soon as you settle in beside him. You forgot how comfortable beds were.

"Um, I'm fine," he says.

Yeah, right.

"Don't lie to me, George," you say, kind of annoyed. Kind of hurt. "Just be honest about it if you don't trust me. Are you cold? I really don't need the blanket."

He's quiet for a moment.

"I nearly died in a storm like this when I was little."

Oh yeah, death. That thing everyone worries about except you.

You're slowly learning to worry about it again, as you get more and more comfortable with him.

You hug him close, and he leans into you. He's so fragile right now, breath shallow, but he holds onto you tightly. You feel your heart melting as you tell him everything will be alright, that he's safe, that you're here. That he isn't alone.

You wish you could be here with him forever.

Morning brings problems, and it's difficult not to blame the bed. George is struggling with the fire. He looks scared.

You don't want him to die, but is there even anything you can do for him? Or does it all end here, with George sitting helpless on the hearth?

What can you do?

"Do you have a bucket?"

He keeps staring into the damp ashes in the fireplace, eyebrows furrowing.

"Of course I have a bucket."

You want to offer to go alone, to take all the risk for him, but if he didn't come with you, he'd freeze to death in this house before you got back.

"We could bring some soul fire back from the nether."

He's looking at you now, and it isn't the cold that makes you frozen.

"It's real?"

Oh, and it's almost cute how ignorant his caution has left him. Except for the implications: he probably hasn't fought much, you'll probably have to protect him the whole time, you can't count on him to have your back.

This is going to be hell. Literally.

He's going to die.

"Of course it is. I've been there."

"I'll die," he says, looking back down, and even though you were just thinking that, you lean over off the bed and reach out to touch his chin. He lifts his head to watch you.

"I'm not going to let you die, George," you tell him, and his eyes go wide.

"But--"

And you can't stand to have him question this. He has no right to doubt you.

"Do you trust me?"

He breathes out a numb sigh and nods, and you snatch the blanket off the bed as you leap to him to wrap him up. He looks so cold, and you need him to be warm, because you need him to stay alive. He looks hopeless. It makes you half angry and half worried as he lays his head on your shoulder.

"Alright, we can go to the nether," he says, but it's not like a plan, it's like a resignation, as if he's telling the world he gives up.

"I'll take care of everything," you assure him, desperate for him to believe in your ability. He feels cold in every place you're touching him, but he's not shivering. You feel like that's a bad thing. "I'll pack."

He tells you he's tired, and you bite your lip as you pull your bag off the table to pack it.

How are you going to keep him alive?

Trekking to surface lava would be a terrible idea with the cold, especially because you know there's none around here. So you pack up a ridiculous amount of food and carry George to the cave you nearly died in last spring, because you remember hearing lava there and it seemed expansive enough that you think there's a good chance you can find the resources you'll need to prepare for the journey.

You don't like leaving George alone, but he's asleep, and you don't want to wake him. You figure you may as well let him sleep, since he can't get into trouble while unconscious.

You gather enough iron to make a sword and shield for yourself, and then debate whether to do it for George as well. He'll definitely need a shield, but is a sword a good idea?

He's competent enough with his axe. He can probably figure a sword out too. You get more iron.

As you work on the shields, you wonder how you got yourself into this mess. How could you manage to get attached? What is wrong with you? Do you *want* to get hurt when something kills him?

Because George is going to die. He can't protect himself the way you can. He isn't as good at surviving.

"Where are we?"

Sleepy, and cute because of it, but you can't even tug a smile onto your face as you think, *You're going to die, George, and leave me alone, and I can't even hate you for it.*

"Underground. I'm making some shields before we go to the nether, you should--"

You act on instinct, because you're in a little corner out of sight of the only opening to the rest of the cave, but George is right across from that gap in the wall. He's the only possible target for the skeleton you just heard. You leap in front of him, shield raised defensively, and block the archer's arrow with a satisfying thunk.

Maybe you should have brought string for a bow.

"Thank you for the arrow," you tell the skeleton, even though it can't understand you.

"What was that?" George asks, and he doesn't sound afraid, but he's probably just suppressing it.

"You probably shouldn't watch this."

He insists that you tell him what shot the arrow, and the fear in his eyes tells you that you were right. You're an idiot, falling in love with a guy who's this clueless about monsters.

He comes over to the table and wants to know what you're doing, so you shift, standing directly behind him to look over his shoulder and guide his hands. He seems comfortable as he leans backwards just enough to slot into your embrace, like he was meant to fit in your arms this way, warmth shared between your chest and his back. He's easy to teach, but you almost wish he wasn't so that you could spend more time with him like this, with your arms around him to show him how to move his hands. He's warm, and steady, and you want to hold him this way always. It makes you feel like he's safe, like you're safe from ever losing him.

He pulls away when you begin to forge the swords, and you let him go wistfully. You talk idly until he falls asleep again.

As he sleeps, you make a bow. You don't have any string, but there's always a chance you'll find some, and if you do, you want to have the bow already formed so you can string it immediately. You put the empty bow on your back and tuck your two arrows into your belt. It isn't much, but it's something.

River looks so peaceful sleeping. You're reluctant to wake him, but you do. Seeing him hold a sword makes you worry.

"We're ready to go," you tell him, handing him a shield. He takes it with his right arm, which he uses to fight with his axe, so he'll need it free for the sword as well. "That's the wrong arm, you should leave your sword arm free."

"I'm left-handed," he says, and you tilt your head to the side, wondering why that doesn't apply in every case.

"Oh." He's tense. "Okay, cool."

He looks up at you, and some of the tension leaves his shoulders.

On the way through the cave, a spider leaps from the ceiling, and you halfway give up on all of this, but even as you're calling out a warning, George turns, sword slashing up through its legs and then coming back down to stab its abdomen.

Woah. How is he still so hot scared and covered in string? You appraise him carefully. Somehow you forgot, in all your worry, about the muscles in his arms, and the reflexes that allowed him to notice you every time you came to watch him.

"You're a natural," you tell him honestly, and he seems embarrassed.

"Let's move on," he grumbles.

He follows you, more cautious than he needs to be, especially now that you know he can hold his own. He doesn't need you to take head anymore, he should stand beside you where he belongs.

Lava glows at the bottom of a drop-off, the way it usually happens, and you look over the edge.

"We could make that," you say, peering around the edges of the cave floor to see how far the pit of lava extends beneath the rock you're currently perched on. Not too far.

George tugs you back, and your throat tries to close as you remember again that you're mortal. George makes you feel normal, is the problem. He makes you feel fine, like you're in the real world where dying wasn't a permanent thing, where you just came back to the same little clearing each time. You miss the world you were born in so badly.

"And if we didn't, this would all be for nothing," he says, as if you don't already know.

"You're such a coward, George," you tell him, unsure why you're being so defensive, because he's right.

"I'm just being cautious," he snaps. "I don't want to die, Dream!"

You don't want him to die either. A hiss, though, and you barely get your shield up in time as you turn. George doesn't, and you hear him land on the stone below, you hear his laboured breathing.

...Well. He *did* make it.

Getting to the nether makes you feel more confident. You know this place, and you know how to survive here. It's second nature to you.

But not to River. He wants to sleep.

It almost hurts to look at him, so sleepy-cute and stumbling, pouting at you as he lays down on the blanket you spread out. Your heart wants to burst.

"I could keep you awake," you tell him, watching his lips, and you see them part as realisation dawns on his face.

"Oh?" he mumbles, as you touch his expression. "Okay, yes. Yes, Dream."

He goes easy onto his back, letting you put yourself above him. You want to push his shirt up and see that little trail of hair on his stomach, so you sneak a hand up underneath the cloth as he lifts his head like he wants to kiss you. His stomach is *soft*, just like your heart, and you want to make him shiver. There's a heat at your core, and you feel the same heat mirrored against your hips as his press up towards you. You gasp. You want into him.

"Let me kiss you," he sighs.

No. No, not yet, not now.

"There's something I want to hear first," you hint, and George's hands find your hips to press you down. You swallow a throaty groan. Your heart is racing.

"What is it?"

You can't help smirking at the look on his face, so shameless in his desperation.

"You're so eager," you tell him, utterly fascinated. "It's so enticing, you have no idea how attractive you are."

His eyelids flutter for a moment, and he looks like you've slammed open the door to his soul, left him exposed.

"Tell me what you want me to say," he says, and it's almost whining, so you can't help but laugh quietly as you lean down to let the secret brush his ear.

"I love you."

George pulls you closer, and says it back, and everything is bliss. You want to make him beg for you, you want to put him on his knees. You need his desperation like you need air. He looks so beautiful when he wants you. You have to kiss him for it, because he deserves it, and if anything that makes him even more desperate, because he pleads when he pulls away,

"Touch me, please touch me."

Your hands are on his stomach and the urge to tease him is too strong to ignore. You're nothing if not a mischievous person, and you just-- you want him. You want him to be yours to play with and bait and tease. You can't believe he's already begging you. He looks so beautiful.

"Look at you, begging for it." You mean it. "So good for me, George, good boy."

His eyes go out of focus as he gasps another plea, and you tease at the front of his pants, saying,

"Such a pretty little thing."

The sound he makes reminds you of the time you got struck by lightning above an ocean monument, but he covers his mouth afterwards like it wasn't perfect, and you need to hear it again. You lick your lips and start to feel your way up his body.

"You sound so good, baby, let me hear you."

As your hands pass his stomach, you hear that sound another time despite the hand still in his way. He arches up towards you, grabbing your wrist and gasping,

"Dream, please touch me, please just touch me."

You chuckle at his eagerness. He deserves to be kissed again, so you give it to him.

"If I make you come, you'll get sleepier."

He doesn't understand at first, but as you explain, you see the dawning need in his eyes. Delicious.

And if he asked you to make him come anyway, you would, but he submits to the mere implication of a decision from you and just squirms as he lets you kiss him. He's perfect. You don't know how you got so lucky.

Or unlucky, as the case may be, because everything you have right now is something you're going to lose.

You pull back.

"We should keep moving."

You've made another stupid mistake like that spring night in the cave when you almost died, except this situation is significantly more dangerous, and there's a much higher chance you won't make it out alive.

And this time River is with you. He seems terrified when you come clean, but he presses on so bravely regardless. You hope that that bravery won't keep him from running if things go south, if you have to hold off a horde of monsters so he can get away.

"Are these things even alive?"

You shrug, looking at the pigman, wondering the same thing about yourself.

"Enough to feel pain. Isn't that what matters?"

You are alive, and real, and George tries to reach out to the pigman the same way he reached out to you. You watch it curiously, because you've never thought to try that before. The pigmen have always been little more than a backdrop to you. They aren't blazes, and you don't get anything useful from looting their corpses, so you usually just ignore them.

The pigman doesn't reach back out.

Searing pain. Things have gone wrong. It's worse than normal, and you realise you forgot to make armour. Not that you usually bother with it when you race to kill the dragon, but usually you try to have a shield to block the fireballs, and you don't get hit at all.

You might actually die.

As long as George gets out, you have to be okay with that.

"I'll be okay, we just need to get out of here," you tell him, as your stomach screams in pain. You honestly don't know if it's a lie or not.

Definitely a lie, you realise, as you turn and dash up a short set of stairs that you definitely shouldn't have taken. You aren't thinking clearly. You ran for the spawner on instinct, because that's what you do when you want to kill the dragon. But right now, you don't need blaze rods, you just need to survive.

In a moment of weakness, you can't stand the thought of telling him to run, of staying behind so he can make it out.

"George, come on," you plead, needing him beside you. A blaze gets a hit on your shoulder with one of its rods, and you scream without meaning to, because it hurts. The pain doesn't fade. Out of the corner of your eye, you see skeletons falling, and then George leaps up the stairs, eyes blazing like the monsters themselves as he tears them to pieces. Seeing him like that, fighting so hard just to get to you, puts a funny feeling into your stomach. The strange combination of pain and arousal,

both searing hot, makes you a little bit nauseous.

It feels so good to have your back to his. To know he's here, backing you up. If you had eyes, you'd want to close them in relief as the pain in your shoulder makes you dizzy.

"Let's get out of here," he shouts.

"On three," you agree, searching for an opening.

A pigman squeals and your heart stops. You didn't hit one, so it must have been George, which means he's as good as dead, because the nether wastes are full of them and there's a wide stretch between the fortress and your portal. You feel George flinch, and you want to cry. You don't want to watch him die as the pigmen swarm onto the balcony.

But they're not attacking George. They're attacking a blaze. George grabs your arm, pulling you down the steps, and you stumble after him, bleary with relief. You're so glad he's alive. He's okay. He's going to live.

He saved your life back there.

"You said you'd be fine," George says accusingly when you admit this, and you turn your face down towards the ground.

"I lied," you tell him. "I didn't want you to slow down for me, I just wanted you to make it."

He calls you an idiot and makes you drink some soup, pulling you into his lap to feed it to you. The healing makes you sleepy, because it's hard not to feel safe around him even here. He leads you back to the portal, and you sit down on the edge of the frame and pull him with you, leaning into him. The surge of nausea is a relief, and so is the regular darkness of the cave. No falling ash, no flesh underfoot, just stone and stale air and George's arm around your shoulders. Safe.

"I'm so glad we're out of that horrible place," George mumbles, and you nod even though you usually have a lot of fun in the nether.

"Let's go. You have the soul sand?"

"Yep," George says, smiling at you. "I- I love you, Dream."

You pull him into a tight hug and say it back.

You've never really been certain what you are, but as you touch George the following morning and marvel at every single shape of his body, at the hair on his stomach and legs and arms and-- everywhere, basically-- you feel like it doesn't matter. You don't need to be human to watch him pleading for you, to lay with him, to make him feel good. Everything about him is beautiful.

You feel safe in his bed.

And everything goes wrong, the way it always does for you. It would have been nice to have at least a month with him, but one morning, barely a week after you get back from the nether, you hear a cry while George is out gathering snow to melt. You rush outside just in time to see him die.

A skeleton is hidden under a tree, and it cowers away from the light as you turn towards it.

This is the monster that killed George. This--

A whizzing sound. You take an arrow to the neck and stumble back, raising your arms instinctively; you left your shield and weapons inside, like some kind of idiot. The skeleton is drawing the bowstring back again, and you look up at it defiantly, daring it to let go, to release the arrow that'll set you free.

Because there's nothing left for you here. George's house already feels like a ghost behind you, existing just to haunt you, empty like the eye sockets you stare into as you await your death. If you stayed in this world, it would make you feel like dying every time you looked at it, every time you remembered helping George oil the door hinges so they wouldn't squeak as loudly.

The skeleton's fragile fingers open. The air whistles as the arrow whisks through it. Bruiselike pain blossoms behind your mask, and you hate the fact that you aren't dead yet.

"Kill me!" you shout, no longer bothering with the accent you copied from George. Your voice is wet with blood, ragged from the arrow in your throat, but you manage a final wordless yell, waving your arms as you advance towards the skeleton. It backs up, fingers fumbling on its bow, but it still manages to nock an arrow and pull back the string.

Maybe you're projecting, anthropomorphising, but it seems confused as you get in close enough to shake it by the shoulders and don't hurt it. It releases the arrow nonetheless, point blank, and the moment of blackness would be welcome if it didn't erase the pain.

It feels wrong to breathe in and be whole, to look up at the sky, to feel the grass beneath your feet. None of it feels real. You let out a strangled scream and wish for an arrow to stab back through your throat, a hammer to smash your face with like the second arrow slamming against your mask.

All you can do is let your jaw drop and reach up to grab it. You tug hard, relishing the popping sounds you draw from the joint. Your vision goes grey and blurry from the pain, but your mind clears, sharpening to a deadly edge. George is gone. You are utterly, painfully alone.

"Dream, stop!"

And now you're hallucinating. You may be unable to replicate his voice with your own mouth, but your mind knows it perfectly. You tighten your grip on your outer jaw and tug hard, and it comes free on one side with a sickening crunch.

"Dream!"

And it hurts. Both your jaw and your heart from the way his voice sounds, would sound if he saw you doing this.

But he can't see you. Because he's dead. Because you let him die. You dig your fingers into the other side of the joint, the side that's still connected, and with one last effort, it comes fully undone. You work your inner jaw from side to side, and wonder if you should take your face off too, look in some water for your reflection, see how you'd look if you were human like him. If you could die like him. If--

Something tackles you, and you let it, crashing to the ground on your back.

"Dream, what-- what did you just-- why would you--"

George is crying, and his familiar weight atop you makes you stop short. You don't know if you could hallucinate that.

You actually don't know if you even hallucinate in the first place, if that's something your mind

does.

"George?" you mumble, and his warm hands land gently on your inner face, soft fingertips feeling the tender spots where you tugged the bottom half of your face free.

"Dream, why would you do this to yourself? It's just a world, we can rebuild that house, we can-- Dream, it's okay."

This can't be real. This isn't real. There's no way.

"It's real, Dream," George says. You didn't mean to say those things out loud, but it's hard to distinguish between thought and action right now. "Are you okay? Your voice sounds funny."

Your hands freeze on his waist. You don't remember reaching out to touch him.

You weren't thinking about your voice at all. It hadn't even occurred to you to worry. If George wasn't really here, if you were hallucinating right now, that hallucination would probably wait until you thought of it to ask about your voice.

Right?

"How are you here," you ask him weakly, not answering the question, and he settles down atop you, body pressed all the way up against yours. The warmth and weight calms you.

"It hasn't even been a day, Dream, I didn't go that far from spawn and I heard you yell. Seriously, are you okay? How did you die already? You were in the house, and I know you can take on a skeleton."

"I let it kill me," you tell him. "I didn't-- I thought-- you go through the worlds too? I thought I was the only one, all the other people, the villagers, they don't even know about other worlds--"

"I mean, why did you think I was living all alone even though I told you I grew up with people? Dream, why would you-- you mean you thought you would stay all alone? You thought I was like the monsters or the villagers or pets?"

"Yes!" you exclaim. "I don't-- George, I don't understand."

"Here's how it works," George explains calmly. "Every time you die, you get put into the next world."

"I know that already," you say, drinking in the sight of his face. "I just don't understand-- you must've already been to like, every world I went through before I met you, right? How did I not see your builds? Your house wasn't like the village houses, I would've noticed something was up."

George bites his lip and looks away.

"Well, I sort of went through a phase where I just-- well, killed myself over and over again. Just, every time I died I would go and try to find the fastest way to do it again. So you wouldn't have seen any builds."

"Why?" you ask him, head tilting. Even at your lowest, you've never sought out death for its own sake. Which isn't to say you haven't chased down death many a time, but it was never the *only* goal. You always had something else you were doing at the same time, like finding out how long you could stay underwater, or how many hits you could take from a guardian, or whether a gha'st's fireballs would destroy a nether portal. And if dying was the same priority as learning whatever

you were trying to learn, that's your own business.

"I sort of went crazy," George admits. He's still not looking at you, and he's getting tense, you can feel it all throughout his body with the way he's pressed against you. You wrap your arms around his waist and squeeze. "I mentioned my cousin, I think. She had a kid, and the thing about kids is they don't reincarnate. You have to keep them safe until they're adults, and then they can go off on their own if they like."

Oh. You think you know where this is going, but you don't interrupt George. You just hold him tighter.

"So... My cousin and her girlfriend had a kid, and then both of them died when the kid was very young. I wasn't as prepared as I could have been, but I took the kid in, because, you know, that's a whole entire person who deserves to meet his moms someday, when he's an adult, you know?"

"Yeah," you say, moving your hands up Georges back to pat him.

"So I took care of him. I got my act together and made my house the safest house imaginable. Julianne-- my cousin-- she risked her life to save me, you know, that time I told you I nearly died? She was the age where it's like, fifty-fifty you'll reincarnate if you die then, and so if she had died trying to find me in that storm, she may've just been gone. So I wanted to keep her kid safe, but I guess I was a bit overprotective, since as he got older, he just-- ugh, he took more and more risks, snuck out nearly every night to fight monsters-- I hated it, I couldn't stand it, and I was honestly angry with him for doing it. The last thing I said to him was-- I caught him sneaking out one night and I just lost my cool, I told him he was going to die and I'd have to explain to his moms why their kid was gone. And he looked me in the eye and said if they loved him and wanted to see him again they shouldn't've died and left him with someone who didn't actually love him, who just wanted to keep him alive so I wouldn't get in trouble. I didn't want to yell again, so I backed off and tried to calm down, but by the time I went to check on him he had already left. And he just... never came back home."

"That's awful," you say quietly. "So you've been killing yourself in every world ever since then?"

George nods, tears sliding silently down his face. One lands on the bottom edge of your mask and drips down into your ragged joint. It makes the wound sting.

"What made you stop?" you ask. He takes a deep breath, and it's shaky.

"I just... I realised I had no idea how many worlds ahead of my family I was, and I realised I was actually really lonely. So I built my house and I settled in to wait."

"How long were you waiting before I got there?"

George shrugs.

"I kept a tally of the years," he says. "On the wall. But I didn't ever really count the tallies. I'd say probably five hundred or so years?"

Your eyes widen.

"Woah," you say. "That's like, thirty times as long as the longest time I've ever survived."

"Well, you take more risks than me," George says. "Are you going to be okay, by the way? Will that wound kill you?"

You shrug.

"Only if it gets infected," you say. "So-- why are you so afraid to die, if you get reincarnated?"

George heaves a sigh.

"My parents are so lame," he complains. "They always want to spend, like, three hundred years in every world, so every world I go further is an extra three hundred years of waiting. If I ever want them to catch up to me, I'll have to survive longer than that in every single world. Preferably just in one world."

You nod.

"So what you're saying is we should probably get to work on a house now so monsters don't kill us tonight, instead of fooling around?"

George's eyebrows lift, and you smirk at him, sliding a hand down his spine to press him down against you.

"I mean, we can fool around a little," he tells you, licking his lips. "There's time. We can always spend the night in a little dirt hut."

"Then I need you," you tell him. The words slip out like cave spiders swarming through a gap in the wall. "Show me I'm not alone, George, I need--"

Your breath catches, and you bite your lip, hiding your face in George's shoulder.

"I've got you, Dream," he says, and the pressure of his hands through your shirt as he feels your sides makes you shiver. "Just lay back for me. I don't suppose you have oil?"

You make a face, and shake your head. His silly human gestures are rubbing off on you; you never would've moved your mouth into that shape before you met him.

"That's alright," he tells you. "Spread your legs for me, darling."

Oh. Your ears feel warm as you obey him, legs opening to let him settle between them.

"I love you," you tell him. "George, I love you, I need you."

"I love you too, Dream," he says, undoing the button on your pants and leaning down to gently shove your thighs wider apart. You're more flexible than he is, and you show it off, flattening your thighs to the ground on either side. "I'm here. You're so hot."

"Let me get my pants all the way off," you gasp, and he nods, pulling back to watch you as you slide the leather down your legs. You feel a little better with him watching you, safer.

"You look so good," he says. "I'll suck you off, Dream. I'll show you I'm real, this is real."

"George," you murmur, watching him as he just goes for it, no lead up, no teasing. He's looking up at your face as he takes you in his mouth, and you feel so vulnerable with the bottom section of your mask missing, like he can stare right into you.

His mouth is warm and wet. You can hardly stand it. It flings you back into reality, yanking you away from that strange realm of shaky thought and ghost-like action, where it feels like there's miles of water between you and the world. No; this is close, this is immediate. He is touching you, and his hands are so warm on your stomach. You feel like you're being held.

He sucks, and your legs spread wider, giving him more space. He slides his hands down your stomach and out along your thighs, pressing your knees down into the dirt. You cry out, hips bucking, and he chokes, pulling back.

"Keep still, Dream," he scolds you, and you nod distractedly, because he looks so beautiful. He releases your knees to hold your hips down with one hand, and he uses the other to stroke you as he wraps his lips back around the head of your cock. You groan, hands clenching into fists, shaking with the effort of holding still for him.

"Feels so good," you gasp. "George, it feels-- please don't stop."

He lifts his head with a smirk.

"I'm barely doing anything yet, Dream."

You pout at him and grab onto the grass, moving your hips from side to side to remind him what he's supposed to be doing.

"I just like it when you touch me," you say. "Keep going, George, there's my good boy."

He gasps softly, and you smirk down at him, touching the side of his face tenderly.

"Dream," he says. "I'm going to take care of you. I promise, I promise I'll be here. I want to let my friends and family catch up, but I'm not going to just leave you lonely. If you die before me, I'll always follow you."

Your head spins as he puts his mouth back on you and gets back to it. He's warm. You groan as he slides down further, enveloping more of your cock in that wet warmth.

"Feels good," you tell him, as he just keeps taking more in. Isn't he going to choke? Isn't he going too far?

He slows down to a stop, just holding you in his mouth, and your toes curl with the effort of keeping still.

"Please," you say, and he blinks. His eyes are slightly glazed, not as present as usual, but his grip on your hips is strong.

He slides down not even an inch further, head tilting differently now, and you have a moment of complete and utter bliss before he pulls off. You groan, in awe with him-- you think you were in his throat, just then. He looks so beautiful.

"Want to sixty-nine?" he asks you, and your jaw drops. You nod, fumbling with the tie on his pants. You help him out of them, and he smirks at you. "Top or bottom?"

And you can't imagine going on top right now. Even with his body pressed against you, you felt weightless, like you could float away in moments, never to be seen again.

"Bottom," you tell him. "But-- be gentle, I've never-- I haven't done this before. I also don't have a nose."

His face softens, and he pats your cheek.

"Of course, Dream."

You take a deep breath as he turns, and then his knees are on either side of your head as he takes

you back into his mouth. Your hips want to buck, and it's such a struggle to keep them down.

"Hold me down," you tell him, sliding your hands down his sides to his hips. His elbows brace across your thighs, and you groan, testing his strength. You can barely move your hips. He's so warm around you, taking his time.

You're sort of intimidated. Your mouth is watering at the sight of his cock, but you have no idea what you're doing. You decide to wrap your arms around his waist to hug him a little closer, and as you lick precome off his tip, his hips jolt downwards a bit, towards your face. He slides in past your lips, and then pulls back out, lifting his head to say,

"Sorry!! I'm sorry, you might need to hold me up."

"It's okay," you say, as your own hips strain against his weight involuntarily. "I'll just pinch you if I need you to stop."

Because-- in the moment he thrust forwards, the moment before he stopped, when you thought he was going to take your mouth and throat all at once, a shiver ran through you. A shiver of anticipation. Just the thought of letting him use you that way made you so turned on you couldn't think.

He gets back to work around you, and you swallow, licking your lips before you move your hands to his hips to guide him down. He hums around you as you let him into your mouth, going as far as you're able to go without risking choking. George goes still atop you, and then a moment later, he lets you back into his throat. You're deeper this time. It's so warm. You groan helplessly, pressing him down further too, and the slide of him against the back of your throat makes you nearly gag. You suppress it at the last second, but then George *swallows* and you can't just not moan.

But he's in your mouth, nearly in your throat, and you shove him upwards as it becomes too much.

He pulls off to ask,

"You okay?"

You nod even though he can't see you, because when you're doing these things with him you sometimes forget that he's human.

"Um, yes. I'm alright. Can you keep going?"

"You don't have to suck me off," he says, and you bite your lip, wrapping your arms around his waist to hold on.

"I want to, but I don't think that I can right now," you say. "I have no clue what I'm doing, and I think it would be a better idea to wait until you can teach me."

"Yeah, probably," George agrees. "You can just hold on then, alright?"

He doesn't give you any chance to answer before he guides you back into his mouth, and you groan, tilting your head back and pulling George's hips closer so that his thighs are on either side of your neck, and you have room to breathe even though he's flush against you. He hums, and you hold him tighter in response, hips shifting against the ground.

"That's so good, George," you say, turning your head to kiss his leg. He takes you in further with a moan, and you choke on your own saliva. His eyes are only half-open, and his lips are stretched around you. "Fuck, good boy. You're so good."

He doesn't go straight for all the way like before, lifting his head instead to drop it back down. The friction gives you eager shivers all over your body. Every time he pulls up, the breeze has a moment to make you feel chilly as it hits your wet cock.

"Your mouth is so perfect," you tell him. "You look gorgeous right now, George, I love you."

He doesn't stop to respond this time. Instead, he pauses for a moment to take a deep breath through his nose, and you feel like you know what's coming, but you still aren't ready for it when the rest of your shaft gains entrance to that wet, hot mouth, when the head of your cock is enveloped by his throat.

"Ohh," you groan. "George. George, that's so good."

He bobs his head very slightly, and it makes your thighs twitch. You're clinging to his waist right now, watching him deep throat you. You aren't going to last long now. You should probably give him a heads up, but it's honestly really hard to figure out words right now.

"George," you say, and he grunts in response, then moans around you. You bite down hard on your lip, because you weren't ready for that, and try frantically to regain your senses and remember what you wanted to say. "George, I--"

Another sound, and you can't do this, you can't figure out what order to put the words in.

"I'm-- please, it feels so-- I'm really, really close, George, *fuck*--"

He swallows around you, throat pressing in to touch every last inch of you, and you come with a whimper, arms wrapped so tightly around his waist that when he tries to grind, he has trouble. You can see the triumphant look in his eyes as you come, the way he pulls off to let it land on his face and hands and your stomach. His neck, too. It's a little embarrassing how everywhere it gets.

He sighs softly, and it melts your heart as he lays his head down on your cleanest thigh.

"I love you, Dream," he says, and you release your death grip on his waist to reach down and tap his elbow.

"Hold my hand," you say. "I love you."

He wraps his hand around yours with an adorable smile, eyes shut, and you smile too.

He's real. He's here.

Somehow, you aren't alone anymore.

Chapter End Notes

leave a comment, let me know what you thought!! unless ur Child in which case
Please Don't

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

im back bitches

this one has been in progress since like july 2020 it took me ages sorry lmfao

the funniest part is that half of it was written today :')

anywho, warning for a murder-suicide in context of the world progression thingy

ppl who use it/its rock

no clicking the preview button we post like men (that is a lie i usually preview and reread everything i post but i Refuse to do so this time)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Dream," you say cautiously, hoping the confusion in your voice won't alarm him too badly. He's perched up on the roof to work on the thatching, so you aren't exactly eager to startle him right now.

"Yeah, George? Oh, you got a dog?"

He hasn't looked up. You've gathered by now that his vision isn't limited to right in front of his face the way yours is, but you still haven't figured out exactly what the limits *are*.

"No, it's not mine," you tell Dream as the dog opens its mouth and whines, looking at you pleadingly. "I think we have neighbors, or something. It's weird for a dog to come out this far on its own, though."

You look around for the owner, and see no one, which, if you're being honest with yourself, definitely creeps you out a little.

"Oh," Dream says. "Well... I guess we should go say hello, just to make sure they aren't a threat."

You shake your head as you look at the dog's wide, pleading eyes, at the low angle of its tail.

"No, I don't think they are," you tell him, remembering Julianne's dog, and how it could teleport to her no matter how far she went as long as someone else was near it. "I think... I think they're dead. He'd have teleported away from here if they weren't, Dream."

Dream's head tilts, and you see his lips part.

"They can do that?"

You nod.

The dog lowers its head to the ground and wags its tail, begging, then whines again, pointing its nose to the west.

"I think he wants me to follow him," you say, and that makes Dream look up.

"Okay, I'll go too," he says. You don't try to argue with him; it's only been about two weeks since the two of you got to this world and he found out you were like him, and he still hasn't gone back to his normal, carefree, reckless self. He keeps one eye on you at all times, constantly aware of where you are and what you're doing. Eventually it'll probably start to grate on you to be watched so closely, but for the time being, it's quite nice. Even 500 years didn't get you used to living alone, and it feels much better to have someone else looking out for you.

"I'll pack a dinner," you say, as Dream hops down from the roof. "You'll get the navigation equipment?"

"Yep, I got it," Dream says. Apparently, he's quite the navigator. He's great at finding his way around and recognising landmarks, and he almost never gets lost. You wonder sometimes how he got so good at it.

Dinner is chicken because you haven't established a farm yet. That's always the hardest part of setting up somewhere new. You're going to miss potatoes until you can find some in this world.

You pack the chicken in your bag and meet Dream at the west side of the plains. The dog followed you around that whole time, and you fed it a bit of raw mutton because it just looked so pathetic. Its eyes are a little brighter now, and it looks more alive.

"Alright, let's go," Dream says. You take his hand and follow the dog into the woods.

Before ten minutes of walking, you see light through the trees. The dog leads you up to a path along a river, which runs from north to south. The path is raised slightly from the ground, but not so much that you can't just step up onto it, and it's constructed from spruce wood. Lining the path are lightposts.

The dog sniffs the air, looks back at the two of you, and then turns south and keeps going. You and Dream follow behind.

After not too long, the path turns west again to cross the river, and you slow down to take in the sight before you.

A gigantic mansion in the trees, backlit by the orange, flame-like sunset, built from the same kind of wood as the path. There's a spiral staircase leading up around the trunk of one huge spruce tree, and the dog runs over to the base of it and then looks back at you, panting, ears perked up.

"Woah," Dream says. "This is amazing, how did they get so much wood? It must have taken forever."

You shrug, because you don't know what's so impressive about chopping down trees, and blink a few more times at the enormous treehouse above you. The lanterns aren't lit, but the house must be gorgeous when they are. The dog barks.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming," you grumble, tugging Dream up the stairs. Each step has a worn area in the center that's shinier from being stepped on. This place must have been lived in for a long time.

There's a circular garden at the top of the staircase, probably about 20 meters wide, with wheat, carrots, and potatoes each growing in their own little pie-slice. There are benches lining the wedges with bits of dirt lingering on them, and a few tools scattered about. A diamond hoe. This settlement is well-established. You notice that the soil in the garden itself was recently disturbed. If not for

the glass roof over the whole garden, you'd guess it hadn't rained between now and when the crops were planted. Even so, you don't think they could have been watered many times before now, or the dirt would have settled some. Not to mention the benches, which would have been swept clean in time.

Three paths split the crops apart and lead into open hallways; one pointing north, and two others pointing southeast and southwest. The dog leads you down the southeast hallway towards a unit at the top of another humongous tree. The outer wall is made of the same spruce wood as the rest of the building, but through the open door you can see that the floor is lighter and the walls are orange. Whoever built this place had a strong sense of design, if not one you would personally agree with. There is effort put into the materials used, into the detailing on the railing lining the path to this room (geometric shapes and the letter S carved at intervals; |_|—|_ S et cetera). It's carved roughly, but with care.

As you get closer, still studying the architecture, you hear a sound you never thought you'd hear again, and you let go of Dream's hand, taking off into a run, even passing the dog.

The bubbling of a fish tank on the right side of the room utterly fails to distract you from the crying child laying curled up in a corner to the left of the entrance.

"Oh, no, no," you say, rushing over and scooping the child up in your arms. They make a little surprised noise, and then go on crying. You worry for a moment that they might just want to be left alone, but they cling to you tightly, dissuading you of that fear.

The dog comes trotting up and licks the child's foot, and they rub their eyes and peek down at it.

"Doggie?" they say, and you smile as Dream enters the room.

"Yes, that's your doggie," you say. "He's a good boy, isn't he, little one. Are you alright?"

Dream's mouth is hanging open, and so is the child's.

"Don't be shy," you say kindly, and the child clamps their mouth shut and shoves at your chest. You set them down, and they scramble away from you, cowering in the corner, arms wrapped around their knees.

You take a leaf out of Dream's book and turn your back on the child as the dog approaches them. Their scared eyes were the same shade of brown as spruce bark, so you decide to call them Spruce until they tell you their name.

"George," Dream whispers, and you nod.

"I know," you murmur. "Are your parents around?" you ask the kid. There's a snuffle, and then the child bursts into tears. Dream's shoulders are stiff, and he looks as uncomfortable as you've ever seen him.

You were afraid of this. As soon as you saw the child, you knew you were probably dealing with a dead parents situation. And dammit, why does this always have to happen to you?

"Are you hungry?" you ask the child, peeking over your shoulder at them. They have their arms wrapped around the dog's neck, and they're glaring at you even as tears stream down their face.

"Where's my dad!" they shout, and the dog picks up on their anger and flattens its ears against its head, baring its teeth at you. "Where's my mom? Did- did you kill them? Is that why Petal led you here? I told her to find my parents. You aren't my parents! Who *are* you?"

Your shoulders slump.

"I'm George," you say, keeping your voice soft, and the child lets out a strangled scream, letting go of the dog's neck and running at you. You aren't prepared, so they're able to tackle you to the ground, and even though they're small, they know how to throw a punch.

But you don't fight back, because this is a child who has lost their parents, and an aching nose is nothing compared to what they're going through. Not to mention, they're afraid. You're a stranger, and you've followed their dog into their house. So you just protect your face with your hands and try to scoot away.

Suddenly, the slight weight of the child disappears from atop you, and you look around, confused.

They're hovering-- no, they aren't, Dream has lifted them up by the back of their neck like a kitten, one-handed, and you watch in shock as he half carries, half drags them back out the door and hauls them over the rail to dangle them above the ground.

"Don't you even *touch* him," Dream snarls, and you swallow your shock, getting over yourself through sheer willpower.

"Dream, *stop*," you cry out, scrambling to your feet and leaning out over the railing to try and get some kind of stable hold on the kid, but they're kicking, and it's hard. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Dream flinches back from you, shoulders hunching up defensively, and you know if he hadn't tugged it off his own face, his jaw would be clicking shut right now.

And he loses his grip on the child, but by then you've managed to get an adequate hold on their shirt, and they don't even fall a meter as they swing into the rail. They reach out in terror, wrapping their arms around yours, and you get your other arm around their waist. They're shaking, eyes squeezed tightly shut, and what strikes you the most about this situation is that Dream doesn't help you lift them back over the rail.

Dream doesn't help you.

You were so focused on getting Spruce to safety that you stopped paying any attention to Dream, and you look around for him as they cling to you.

"Dream?" you call out. A moment of eerie silence before you get any response.

"Maybe I should go on ahead," he says, voice dead, and you frown, unsure what he means.

"Huh?"

"You know. Follow this kid's parents and let 'em know you've got this and you'll be following once the kid is--"

"*No*," you say. Spruce flinches in your arms, and you realise how vehement you sounded just now, and hold them tighter.

"But I thought-- You said--"

"Don't even think about leaving me, Dream," you say, voice shaking. "Don't you dare make me do this alone. Why the hell would you-- what is *wrong* with you today?"

He's quiet for another moment.

"Why were you so mad at me," he grumbles. "I thought-- you said you *loved* me--"

"We'll have this conversation later, Dream," you say. "This child isn't an infant, they know what we're saying. Are you hungry?"

They shake their head mutely, eyes wide, and you sigh.

"Can you point me towards where you sleep?"

No reaction for a solid twenty seconds, and then they tilt their head back towards the door, past the fish tank. You find a bed with brown covers next to a bookshelf full of books, and pull the covers back. By now, Dream has slunk back in, head hung low, but you don't say anything to him for now.

Spruce curls up on their side when you set them down, and shuts their eyes as you pull the blankets over them.

"Night, Mom. Night, Dad," they say sleepily, and you bite your lip as tears well up in their eyes. Oh no. They must be confused, from the stress of getting dangled off the edge of a treehouse.

"Goodnight," you say, and they yawn.

You turn to face Dream, and take his hand, leading him out of Spruce's room and shutting the door.

"We need to talk," you say tensely, as he sits down on the floor, and you tilt your head in confusion as he pats the floor across from him.

You sit.

"That wasn't--"

He puts a finger to your lips, and digs in his pack, getting out some stew and holding it for you to drink. You roll your eyes, and drink it. The ache in your nose disappears.

"Okay, now we need to talk--"

Dream shakes his head stubbornly, and you heave a sigh. Why is he being so difficult?

He gets out a cloth, and wets it with water, then starts cleaning your face. You narrow your eyes at him, but then he pulls the cloth back to put more water on it and you see that it's red with blood. Oh. Spruce must've had some great parents, for how well they knew self defence.

Dream wipes more blood off your neck, and puts away the water and the cloth. Then he folds his hands in his lap and faces you.

You heave a sigh.

"Why did you--"

You don't even know what to say.

Dream fidgets, hands wringing in his lap as he bites his lip.

"I got overprotective," he says. "That-- that tiny human was hitting you, did you expect me to just let it hurt you?"

"Yes," you say calmly, and he squares his shoulders, jaw clenching in a stubborn line.

"Well, that's stupid," he says. "I'm not going to let anything hurt you, George."

"I expect you to treat children with care," you tell him. "They couldn't have killed me, and they were afraid. They had reason to lash out, Dream, and you threatened to kill them for it. That isn't okay. They just lost their parents."

Dream slumps a little, facing just slightly downwards now. He doesn't speak for a moment. A breeze rustles your hair.

"I just-- I just got so scared," he whispers, and you see his lower lip trembling, so you lean forwards and pull him into your arms. He tucks himself into your embrace, leaning his head on your shoulder. "I'm sorry."

You sigh, and pat him on the back as his shoulders shake.

"I'm not the one you need to apologise to," you tell him, and he nods.

"Did you mean that?" His voice breaks. "About wanting me to stay?"

You frown, and hold him a little closer just out of reflex.

"Of course I did," you say. "Why would you doubt it?"

Dream shrugs.

"I just... I figured you could do a better job without me."

Your stomach turns at the thought. Doing this without Dream would be a nightmare.

"The last time I tried to raise a kid alone, the kid died," you say, and your voice is sharp, but it shakes. "And I didn't even stick around long enough to explain anything to his parents."

Dream unfurls his arms and pulls you into a hug, and you cling to him, hiding your face in his neck.

"I'll stay, River," he says. "I promise."

You almost pull back, but the thought of leaving the warmth of his embrace makes your heart ache.

"River?" you say, and Dream shifts.

"Oh," he says. "Uh-- it's what I called you before I learned your name. Since we met by that river."

"That's cute," you say, pulling him closer. "Let's find a place to sleep."

"Here?" Dream says. "Hm, yeah, I guess that makes sense. We shouldn't make the kid wake up all alone."

Alone. It feels as if you've spent enough time alone to tide you over for the rest of your existence.

If nothing else, you're relieved you got to this world recently enough after this kid lost their parents that they didn't have to spend too much time on their own.

"Sapnap, please stop spending your time on this," you say, gliding up behind the ghostly form of

your husband. He turns to face you, and there's no defiance in his eyes, just a dead sort of hopeless desperation.

And you get it. You really do, but there's nothing that can be done now. As good as the two of you have gotten at navigating between worlds, there's no way to truly come back to one after you've died within it. These ghostly forms are the most you can do, spectres spectating the lives you lost.

"She's all alone, Karl," Sapnap says, eyes flooding with ghostly tears, and your composure breaks as you think of your child stranded in the middle of the woods without the skills to survive.

She must be so afraid.

"She has Petal," you say, trying to be optimistic even though your face betrays your heartbreak. "She'll protect our baby from the monsters for as long as she can."

"But that won't be long," Sapnap says. "Listen, Karl, I just want to see our little sapling alive while I still can. Once... Once she dies, I'll stop watching so much. I'll come back home and stay home. But for now..."

You nod, because you get it, you really do. Sapnap is coping by watching her, trying to memorise everything about her before she's lost forever. You're just trying to move on.

"How long have you been here?" you ask him, and he sighs.

"Not even a minute before you came after me," he says. "Hey-- look at this."

He glides up through the spiral stair case and waves his arms at two people walking along the north path.

"Woah," you say, breezing forward to catch their conversation.

"Oh, I've been calling them Spruce in my head," says the one with the sunglasses, and your heart leaps up in your throat. Is that your baby they're talking about? "Since their eyes match the bark. I don't know, though, maybe they'll tell us their actual name soon. I hope so."

You exchange an excited glance with Sapnap, whose mouth is hanging open. And then his eyes light up, and he throws his hands up in the air.

"Kar!" he exclaims, zooming around you in a circle and then trying to pull you into his arms, but he goes through you. "Haha, whoops! Kar, do you understand what this means?"

You smile at his antics, and feel your heart start to melt as hope seeps in. It was petrified like a tree turned to rock when you realised you had left your baby behind with no one to protect her, but it's coming back to life now and budding like springtime.

"We'll get to see her again," you say softly, and Sapnap laughs in pure delight, spinning around in the air and doing some flips. "Unless these guys really mess up, our baby is going to be okay."

"Let's fucking gooo!" Sapnap says, and you can't help laughing along with him.

He grabs at your hand, and even though it goes right through, you know what he's thinking and where he's going, so you follow him through the wall of Spruce's room.

She's asleep with Petal at her feet. Petal has eaten recently, and as soon as you and Sapnap enter the room, she looks up and stares right at both of you.

"Who's a good girl?" you say, and her mouth opens in a sweet doggy smile as her tail gives a little wag. Spruce stirs, and wraps an arm around Petal to hold on.

"She's so small," Sapnap says, and you sigh, floating closer to him and wishing you could hug him here. He sounds like he could use the comfort.

"We'll check on her again tomorrow," you say. "For now I wish you'd come home and get some sleep."

"Alright, Karl," he says, rolling his eyes and smiling at you indulgently. "I'll humour you."

He stifles a yawn, and you raise an eyebrow pointedly at him as he pops out of this world. You follow.

You wake up alone, and freak out, because the last time you woke up alone in a bed, you died.

The smell of spruce wood is what pulls you out of it, because your house in that world was made of birch. You get up and stumble out the door to see George sitting on the edge of the balcony, with his feet hanging off the edge.

You sit down beside him and lean against him with a sigh.

"Good morning," you say. He doesn't respond, and you peek over at him to see his face full of uncertainty. Your heart twinges, but you don't know how you can even help. "The sunrise is pretty."

"Mm," George says. He's staring off at the horizon, eyes distant.

"Should we check on the kid?"

George winces, and you sigh, leaning your head on his shoulder and saying,

"It's not gonna go bad this time, you know."

He shrugs.

"You can't know that, Dream."

"No, I do know," you insist. You bite your lip, unsure if you should bring up the subject, but...

"You got so close last time, right?"

George's shoulders tense, and for a moment you feel like you've messed up, but then his arm sneaks around your waist from behind.

"Yeah."

Emboldened by his grip on you, by the assurance that he needs you, you straighten your shoulders and charge ahead with what you've been thinking all night.

"Well, this time, you've got me to help you. I'll light this entire area up, George, so all the monsters will stay away. We've also got the dog to help us. You're a wonderful man, George, and between the two of us, I know this kid is gonna be just fine."

Still, George doesn't seem convinced, and your heart twinges at the dead look on his face.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he says, but his heart isn't in it.

There's a long moment where you can't think of anything to say. And then you start thinking about yourself, because you've begun to realise that the only way you can relate to George is by framing it in the context of your own experiences. Sometimes it feels like there's an impossible gap between the two of you, like you spend every waking moment tossing letters, weighted with stones, towards the other side. Like the bridge between you is something very fragile, very precarious, so that the very act of walking towards him could send everything crashing to the ground.

Like the child. Like Spruce would have if George didn't save them.

Your stomach goes hollow with guilt, but you push it aside for now to redirect your focus to George's unhappiness.

You wonder if it's anything like what you feel even now that you know you won't lose him.

You decide it's probably worse. It's probably more like how you felt before, when you let a monster ruin you and then ripped your own jaw off your face.

"Are you scared?" you ask George.

Something in his expression breaks. He finally looks at you.

"As hell," he answers.

And in a flash of intuition, you know exactly what to say, exactly what he needs to hear.

And you say it, but not because of that. You say it because you mean it.

"I'll be with you all the way," you tell him, setting your jaw determinedly. "You won't have to do this alone, George. I know I said I'd help you, but I want you to know that I'm not just going to one day decide I've helped enough and leave. I'm going to commit to this. I- I know I messed up last night. You're right to be angry with me for that. I'm not going to do that again."

And then his arms are around you and he's sobbing, holding onto you and burying his face in your shoulder.

You pat his back and wonder if you'll ever manage to control the anger that made you think it was okay to threaten that child.

Cold. Biting at your nose, but a warm spot snuggled in against your chest. She wiggles a bit and starts licking your face.

Hm! Mama must've been too tired to warm the bricks for the foot of your bed, because your feet are freezing and they ache the way they always do when you don't get warm bricks to keep the joints a good temperature.

You hear unfamiliar voices nearby, and flinch into alertness, eyeing the axe on the wall by your bed.

"It probably wants breakfast, George." Ooo. It. You love that, you love the way it makes you feel like a monster, like you've got more power than you really do. Plus, you can tell whoever was talking didn't mean it as an insult.

And then you remember last night. The way you dangled above the ground in the green monster's

hand.

You take the axe off the wall and lay it across your lap, pulling Petal closer and snuggling into her for comfort. There's a knock on your door.

"Come in," you say, tightening your grip on the handle of your weapon.

They file in and the green one hides behind the human.

"I'm going to make some breakfast," says the human. Probably George. "Do you have a favourite food?"

"Apples," you say without thinking. The green monster shifts, and you stiffen, but it just digs around in its satchel for a moment and then pulls out an apple.

"Catch," it says, tossing the apple your way, and you watch it soar towards you and keep your hands on the axe. It lands in your lap.

"Thanks," you say cautiously, because you know manners.

"I'm sorry for what I did last night," the monster says, and you turn up your nose at it, trying not to start crying as tears make your eyes sting. The ground was so far away. Your neck still hurts from being held there.

"I'm George," the human says. "If you need anything at any time, I'll do my best to help with it."

"You aren't my dad," you mutter sullenly. Petal licks your cheek, but it doesn't cheer you up.

"I know," George says. "You can see him again, though, once you're all grown up."

"I know I can, I'm not stupid," you snap, pulling the covers over your head, hoping they'll leave you alone. Petal burrows in beside you and pants, doggy face smiling at you. She likes adventure. She probably thinks you're in a cave. Ha, maybe that'd be better. At least then you could die.

"I saw an apple tree on the way here," River says, and you perk up immediately, because that sounds like something to do. Something productive that's not just hiding out here wondering if you can ever make up for what you did.

"You're gonna get on the rooftops and check for spots that need repairs, aren't you," you say, and it's not a question, because George is looking jittery the way he does when he knows there's maintenance to do.

He looks at you in surprise, and you realise you know him well enough to read him like that. He leans in and kisses you on the cheek.

"I'm lucky to have you," he says.

Ah!

You smile widely as your heart swells with happiness, and watch as he clambers over the rail and shimmies up one of the support poles to get on the roof.

You shake your head and take the stairs two at a time on your way out. The kid has the dog to protect it, and George is smart about the roofs. They'll all be okay.

The forest brings you clarity. The trees don't need anything from you, and they don't care what you've done.

You gather apples, humming to yourself a song you learned from George. It's peaceful. The shadows of the leaves ripple on the ground like a pond, and you feel the same clarity of being underwater.

You fill your basket with ripe apples and then head back along the wooden path, which creaks like a ship under your weight. You went a bit overboard with the fruit, so you have to keep an eye on it and walk slowly to the treehouse.

A crash. You look up from your basket to see George on the ground, clutching his ankle and groaning. You drop the apples and take off at a run, arriving at his side in a flash.

"Are you okay?" you murmur. His face is pale with pain, twisted up like a gnarled mess of tree roots for your tongue to trip over as you try to ask what happened. "What- how did--"

Hands. Small ones, nudging you away from River. You clench your fists, and then force yourself to relax, as the child gets between you and George and feeds him something out of a bottle.

The pain immediately leaves his face, and you watch it get replaced with awe as he rolls his ankle without so much as a wince.

"Woah," he says, and you're already bowing, prostrating yourself before this child who managed to heal a broken bone in seconds-- you *saw* the angle of River's foot to his leg. It was definitely broken somewhere.

"Thank you," you murmur, head down, watching as River gives the child a wide grin and an enthusiastic thumbs up. It looks over at you, and its jaw drops. Then it lunges towards you and lands on your back, climbing you like you're just a big rock. You freeze, shocked, and River manages to stifle a giggle for only a second before it escapes his mouth in a cackle.

"You're my throne now," the child informs you. River looks delighted as you surge up like a wild horse and the child resorts to grabbing onto your hair to stay on your back. It shrieks. "Bad chair!" it exclaims, so you roll over onto your back and pin it to the ground beneath you for just a moment to teach it a lesson. Then you sit up.

"Bruh," it complains. "What the honk."

River looks at you, and both of you burst out laughing.

The dumb grownups are laughing at you. Well, whatever, that's fine. It's not like you can't take care of yourself. You wander over to the abandoned basket and gather up the apples that fell. They're perfectly red and juicy, which sort of makes you change your mind about the green one. Besides, it didn't look half as scary crouched on the ground like that. And it was fun to climb on.

You take the apples upstairs and put them away in the pantry, and then you go back to your potions work. It's potion day, and your parents planned out your lessons far enough in advance that you can keep going for a while. You imagine Mom smiling at you as you brew a replacement for the potion you just gave George.

That hurts, though, so you stop.

The kid wanders off and you just watched George fall off a roof.

You just watched George fall off a roof.

He stands. You reach for his hand as he takes a step back towards the stairs, and he tilts his head at you curiously.

You *yank*.

He lets you, dropping to his knees in the dirt to crouch above you and be kissed, almost violently, because every time he gets hurt you go a tiny bit crazy.

He bites your lip, and you jolt, shoving him sideways and then turning over so you can slam him to the ground, hand pressing on his back, another at his neck. He bares his teeth, and you have no idea where all of your softness went, but you don't have it in you to be gentle right now.

"Do it," he says. "Say it."

And you didn't even know you had anything to say, but the words slip out like spit now that he's invited them.

"How could you be so careless," you hiss, throat tight with leftover fear. "You could have *died*, River."

"It was stupid," he admits, back arching as your nails dig into the nape of his neck. "Ah-"

You relax your grip because you don't want to hurt him, but the flush on his cheeks suggests something else.

"This isn't supposed to be hot, George," you say, unamused, and he chuckles, low and dirty and rough like tree bark against sensitive skin.

"I guess you just can't help it, then, luv."

His ass lifts, and his legs spread.

Overcome, you stand suddenly, tossing him over your shoulder and taking off at a run. Just-- you need some distance, some *privacy*, if this is something you're going to do in a world where you aren't alone with him.

He's panting and grinning by the time you stop, and he lifts his hand to grasp a convenient tree branch and stretch out, displaying himself for you.

"River," you say, mouth dry. "River, you are temptation incarnate."

His eyes flash, and you see triumph.

"Then do something about it, big guy," he taunts.

You fuck him hard against the tree and make him whimper your name in shameless desperation. He goes to pieces in your hands, cradled between you and the giant oak, and then it's just you and him and the noontime sun beating down even through the trees.

He groans and stretches his back a few minutes later, lying in a heap with you on the ground.

"We should go check on..."

You nod, and make some soup for the scrapes on his back.

He holds eye contact with you as he drinks it.

"I don't want you on the roof without a rope again," you tell him. "Your choice, but that's what *I* want."

He nods, and doesn't even joke about getting hurt on purpose so you'll fuck him this way again. Good. He's beginning to understand how seriously you take his safety.

You make progress with the kid. It's slow, but it's progress. They have a routine, a schedule, and you ask the occasional question.

"Mama says the day after the waxing quarter moon is for laundry," Spruce informs you (and yes, you confirmed their name is Spruce at breakfast this morning). "Your clothes are filthy, you should wash them."

Dream snickers across the room.

"It's right," he says, and you look at Spruce to see them baring their teeth at him in delight. "Stinky George."

You roll your eyes and leave the room to change into something clean.

Neither of them speak to each other while you're gone.

You figured they wouldn't. Dream is kind of a coward sometimes.

Spruce likes to make potions. They're good at it. You get sand from a nearby river to make new bottles when they fill up all the ones they already have, and Dream volunteers to do the smelting while you supervise Spruce.

You don't like working with glass, because you worry about dropping it, so you nod and leave him to it.

You aren't sleeping well. You don't realise that's a problem until you hear a terrible screeching sound on your third night in the treehouse.

You sit bolt upright.

"What was that," you demand, voice shaking.

"Phantoms," Dream whispers, brow furrowed. "Have you-- you've been sleeping, haven't you?"

His voice is desperate, almost pleading. You shake your head, and he curses with feeling.

"Wait," you say, thinking back to bats in a cave in a whole different world. "Wait. They're *real*?"

He nods.

Your heartbeat picks up.

There's an eerie silence, and then a human scream.

You bolt out of bed, Dream not far behind you, and what you see outside terrifies you. Spruce is on the smeltery deck, clutching an empty glass bottle, and you sigh, because you *specifically* told them to wait until morning to get the new bottles.

They're bleeding.

"Are these things after me, or--"

"They'll target you if you're available," Dream says tightly. "Why--"

"Go make sure Spruce is okay," you tell him, shoving him in their direction and walking up to the rail. "I'll keep these things busy."

Without waiting for an argument, you vault over the rail and into a treetop, sliding down the trunk to the ground. You take one look over your shoulder to make sure all of the beasts have eyes on you, and then you take off running.

The forest at night is treacherous. There are monsters everywhere once you pass the edge of the well-lit area, but you stay on the move, leading the beasts away from Spruce.

You need somewhere to hide, but somewhere they can see you, so they won't give up on you and go back for the others. Which doesn't make any sense, but as you come to a lake, it dawns on you.

Water.

The water has to be safe, right?

You dive in and swim out from the shore about ten metres, then turn back and tread water to watch the phantoms' progress.

They're circling above you, and when they dive, so do you.

You should be safe beneath the surface.

But there isn't any time to feel smug, after the first phantom plunges into the water as if it's air, winging through the waves effortlessly, completely unhindered.

It passes through you, and you don't need the frigid ache in your chest to tell you that you're fucked.

You are so fucked.

"Karl!"

You shake him, and he wakes up blearily.

"Huh?"

"We should go to spawn. Just... in case."

"Wha?"

"Nevermind."

You give up on rousing him and go to spawn by yourself, terrified that you'll meet someone there.

The child is sobbing, bleeding from the mouth, and a quick hand to its forehead tells you that it's freezing. You gather it close against your side, and it leans in, soaking up warmth like a cold block of iron.

"I'll carry you to your potions."

Off in the distance you can see the silvery-blue glow of phantoms diving, but you don't allow yourself to worry about that. George is fine. He *has* to be.

You take the steps up to its lab two at a time and then set the child gently in its chair. It stares at the cabinet, and then something seems to wake it up.

It reaches in and downs a potion in a single swallow, and then shudders.

"You're not gonna die on me, right?" you say, and it shakes its head.

You walk over to the window just in time to see a circle of phantoms disperse and fade into the night.

No.

They only do that when they successfully complete a hunt.

No.

You fall to your knees.

"What?" the child asks you.

"He's gone."

Your voice is a whisper almost too soft to hear, but the child seems to understand. Its face goes tight with fear.

For a terrible, selfish moment, you think about throwing yourself at the ground to follow George. But the child's eyes are so wide and its hands are so small and *it can't survive without you*.

You take a deep breath, and turn to it.

"Get some rest," you say, not surprised when it flinches, because your voice sounds dead even to you. "Tomorrow, I'll figure something out."

The bed still smells like River, but it's not safe for you without him. You climb under it, grateful that you don't have eyes, and cannot cry.

You wrap your arms around yourself and only fall asleep when Spruce tiptoes into the room with the dog and both of them join you underneath the bed.

George was here, and now he is gone.

You *have* to just get over it.

The child cries when you wake it up, and you end up carrying it to the pantry to grab an apple.

It takes a few bites and then gives up on that.

"Okay, little monster," you grumble. "Enough moping for right now, let's go get you some guard dogs."

It opens its eyes wide and looks at you doubtfully.

The child stops doubting you after the first wolf walks up to sniff its hand and take the offered bone.

The little scamp has a pack of ten dogs before you feel secure enough to leave it alone and gather resources. You give very specific instructions to stay out of trouble and it just humours you with crossed arms and more life on its face than since George--

Anyway, you leave the child with its horde of dogs so you can go mining.

The first few bits of diamond you find are wasted in attempts to make armour the proper size for a child. The child in question heaves a sigh and opens its closet door. Hanging just inside is a perfectly-sized set of glowing diamond armour.

"Is this why you wanted to mine?" it asks. "Mom and Dad enchanted it to slowly unshrink as I grow."

Your jaw drops, and the damn goblin-thing laughs at you.

You hate kids. George is gonna owe you *so much* reunion sex in a few years.

George is weird.

He knows you think this, so you don't feel bad for it. But it's super weird and kind of concerning, the way he hasn't stopped spectating even once since you taught him how. You float up behind him and open your mouth to ask, even though you know the answer already.

"Bonfire tonight dude, wanna join us?"

He doesn't turn to look at you, and you wait so long without any response that you open your mouth to try again.

"Thanks, Sapnap," he says, "But no. I'll be fine here."

Okay, this is getting stupid.

"Nope."

This time, he turns. You cross your arms.

"What." It's not a question, not when it's hissed out through clenched teeth like that.

"I said no," you tell him, cocking your head to the side. "You need to live your life, I shouldn't have even taught you how to spectate."

"But--"

"Nah, no buts, you need--"

"You have no idea what I need," George says coldly, turning away. "You don't know what I've been through, so back off. I need to be with him. With both of them."

"You're right," you say, and he turns back to face you again. "So tell me. You don't have to give me any details."

His face twists, mouth bending into something ugly and hateful.

"I can't fail again," he says.

"It's out of your hands."

He flinches.

"Listen. Just listen," you tell him. "How is this not pathetic? How is this helpful? If your dreamboat out there fucks up, he's going to need you well rested and ready to comfort him when he--"

"I'm not pathetic," he interrupts, brow furrowed, jaw set.

"Then quit acting like it," you retort.

His eyes narrow. You narrow yours right back.

"Fine," he spits, popping out of existence and back into the world he belongs in right now.

"Fine," you say, to empty air.

Soon it's fall. Spruce doesn't quite remember everything its parents did in previous years, so you think back to that winter with George and set everything up as well as you can in the little dugout that Spruce shows you at the base of the main tree.

"This is for winter," it explains, showing you the stove. "It stays warmer than the treehouse."

You nod, and inspect the large connected storerooms. Those will be good for the vegetables in the garden upstairs.

You and the child both work yourselves to the bone getting everything ready before the first snow finally falls.

And then you get to see the way its eyes go wide and bright that morning when it peeks up through the glass in the trapdoor. The way it grins as it squirms into a thick coat and covers every inch of its skin in various garments.

"What's that getup for?" you ask, and it rolls its eyes.

"Don't you ever get cold?" it scoffs.

You shake your head.

The child, you quickly discover, has terrifyingly good aim.

You are covered in snow.

You are also, perhaps, bellowing and groaning as you chase a smaller monster around beneath the treehouse and declare yourself the Icy Ruler Of All Monsterkind. But nobody can prove that.

The dogs think it's a lovely game to crash into you and knock you into the snow as you chase their favourite person, and the brutal, dog-commanding child laughs loud and happy every time, so you don't try all too hard to dodge out of the way.

The sun rises steadily until noon, after which point you corral the dogs and the singular little monster back into the dugout for dry clothes, dog food, and lunch.

"You aren't so bad after all," the monster tells you, eyes glinting. You poke it in the stomach and then duck before it stops giggling, because it has a pretty quick automatic slap response now.

"You're still a little monster," you tell it solemnly, and it rolls its eyes.

"Whatever, dweeb."

Two winters later it manages to collapse one of the storerooms, and as you survey the mass of dirt in despair, it looks at you innocently from two feet away and points.

"Petal did it."

Petal is old now and only moves away from her spot on the hearth to eat and nose at the child's hands when it doesn't lick its fingers clean enough. (If only its parents could see, they'd be appalled at its lack of table manners.)

Petal looks up when she hears her name, and pants at you happily. You cross your arms and face the child, but it doesn't fess up even after a full twenty seconds of silence.

"We have food in there," you say.

The child's shoulders slump.

"Oops?" it says.

You feel your jaw beginning to twitch in irritation as you hand the walking disaster a shovel and go to retrieve one for yourself.

Parenting sucks.

George is doing a lot better now that he only spends about half his waking hours watching.

You still feel concern, but that's offset by the few times you join him and see the peace on his face, as he watches his lover and your child get along.

So it's not ideal, but he'll be okay.

The years blur together, and then comes a seventeenth birthday.

The child knocks on your door to wake you that morning, and you meet it out at the breakfast table.

"So," it says, bouncing its leg.

"So," you agree.

"I could--"

"Nope," you say. "Not a chance. Not until you're eighteen."

It pouts its annoying little monster pout.

"Aww, but, I'd *probably* be fine--"

"*Probably*," you hiss, "is not *good enough*, Spruce."

Its lips part, and you know it's because you used its name. You only do that when you're serious.

"Okay, but..." it trails off, and you allow it to think as you sip your soup, because if you don't allow it to tell you its concerns, it might just act on them recklessly. "...I mean... it isn't like anyone's ever actually not made it after dying at 17."

You take another sip of your soup, and then sigh.

"Forgive me, River," you murmur, because this secret *does not belong to you*, and you have no way to ask permission to share it.

"What?"

"George told me differently," you say, and Spruce's eyes widen. "He raised a child to seventeen, and then that child grew reckless and died. When George followed, the child was not there."

Spruce has gone quiet.

"Please do not grow reckless, Spruce," you say softly.

It shuts its mouth, and nods.

"I won't, Dream," it says.

It doesn't ask again until the next year, and then you realise with an unpleasant jolt that you must now say goodbye to everything you've built here.

You may not have built the treehouse, but you did add that little awning to the staircase, and you replaced the rope ladder when it rotted, and you put shelves in that closet across from the baths.

You made a home here, and now you have to leave it all behind.

Spruce spends the day before their eighteenth birthday visiting every last corner of the house, opening every door and cabinet and drawer and box. It goes into its parents' room, which hasn't been touched once, and jumps on the bed, choking on the thick cloud of dust that rises into the air at the disturbance. And then it settles in to sleep there.

You crawl under the bed in which you shared three nights with George, and shut your eyes.

Tomorrow, you think. Tomorrow, you'll be back together.

It rains on the last day. Spruce comes to you with a sword and hands it to you solemnly. It tips its

head back, exposing its neck, and your hands shake.

"Do it," it says. "And follow me."

You slit the monster's throat.

A moment later, you do the same to the other monster.

The new world is windy and overcast, or at least, it is when you arrive. The first thing you do is open your jaw hinge, because it feels so strange to have again after not having it for so long.

The child is in the arms of two men you don't recognise, and...

"Dream."

You find River and leap towards him, bowling him over and knocking him flat on his back. He's laughing with tears in his eyes, and you just hold him, breathing in his scent and absorbing the idea of being together again.

"You did it," he's saying, over and over again. "You did it, Dream, you did it, *thank* you."

You hold him in your arms and let him praise you, thrilled to no longer be the only parent it has access to.

George's arms are tight as a vise around your waist, and you're so relieved he didn't move on after nearly ten years of waiting.

"It's so good to see your face," you tell him, and he flushes pink.

"You have no clue how much I missed you," he says.

"Probably about as much as I missed you, right?" you say with a smirk, and he shrugs, smirking right back, eyes glittering with joy.

"Perhaps."

You throw your head back and laugh, caught up in the joy of this moment.

You're together again.

Everything is going to be alright.

Dream is hot and solid within you, hands firm on your waist as he bends you in half. He still remembers exactly how to fuck you perfect, brushing past your sweet spot without jabbing right in and overwhelming you. You tell him so, and he smirks.

"Course I remember how, with all the independent review I did."

You kiss him for being so dumb and cheesy, and he slides a hand from your waist, along your thigh, and to that sensitive spot behind your knee. You kick out reflexively and he catches your ankle in a vise grip. You groan.

"Be still," he orders, and you let your muscles go slack, melting into the bed to let him have his way with you.

He releases your ankle and leans down to whisper in your hear.

"May I overwhelm you?" he asks. A shudder runs through you.

"You mean--"

"I want you to cry for me, River."

You gasp, and grab his hand, biting your lip uncertainly.

"It'll hurt," you say.

"You don't have to," he says into your ear. "But I thought the pain might be part of the appeal."

Your face feels, rather impossibly, even hotter than a moment ago.

He's right, but you've always been afraid of taking that step.

"Try... just a couple thrusts, straight on, and then stop," you tell him, and then he's lifting your hips and oh, *oh*, it's tearing you apart, barely a reprieve between each terrible, merciless thrust.

You feel tears come to your eyes as you thrash, trying to get away, and then he stops, fully out of you, and cradles your face in his hands. Your hips are still bucking, hands clutching at the sheets, as he kisses you on the cheek, a soft brush of lips over your skin. You sob, and it sounds like a hiccup.

"Are you alright?" he asks, voice quiet, and you shrug, overwhelmed and disoriented and *so irrationally desperate* for more. You feel like you're still right at the edge.

He leans closer to kiss your forehead, and when his legs presses against your cock, that's it for you. You gasp out a moan and shudder apart beneath him, cum spilling onto your stomach in the least satisfying orgasm you've ever had.

"Nooo," you gasp, devastated, feeling fragile. "Noo no no, please--"

"It's okay. I'll stop," Dream whispers, and you whimper.

"No, *don't*," you demand. "I-- that was-- I just came and I didn't even feel it, I need to go again."

His jaw drops.

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"Yes," you insist, hips bucking insistently. "Ah--" your cock brushes his leg and it's too much, so much it hurts, but you can't bear to think of stopping. "Get back in me, *please*. Fuck me just like you did before."

He lifts your hips and slides back in, starting slow. It's a lot, each time he hits that spot, and your back quickly arches in a tense line.

He goes back up to full speed after mere seconds, and you cry out, tears spilling readily from your eyes now, cock twitching in oversensitivity on your stomach. He has you encircled with his arms and his body, and you can't get away, and it feels *delectable*.

It's just on the painful side of too much. You soon begin to tell him that you can't, not specifying what it is you can't do, just repeating it over and over again:

"I can't, I can't I can't I *can't*, Dream--"

He muffles you with a kiss and the slight change in angle allows him to go even faster. You keen into his mouth and buck up against his stomach to get that overwhelming friction on your cock.

You tear your head to the side to inform him,

"I'm coming again," and then you cannot speak, you can't process anything you're seeing, all you know is the praise and the pain and the pleasure, wrapped up nice and tight around each other and so tangled up you couldn't possibly even begin to separate them.

Dream keeps going for another half-minute as your moans become more ragged with every thrust, and then he stops, burying himself deep inside you, and groans, low, long, possessive, against your neck, so you can feel the buzz of it on your skin.

"So perfect," he's saying breathlessly. "So perfect, so precious, so beautiful."

You whimper when he pulls out, and then shut your eyes at that strange sensation of dripping. Dream makes a satisfied sound, and you know he's watching it leak out.

"Let me clean you up," he says, and you nod, relaxing in his arms. You missed being taken care of so thoroughly.

He brings you into the bathroom and you lean against him as he wets a cloth. You brace yourself for the cold, but it's warm instead, and your heart melts.

"I love you," you say, while his hand is between your thighs, wiping up his cum. Because you had years to wish you could say it, and you'll be damned if you don't say it to him every day now.

"I love you, I missed you," he says, kissing your forehead. He wipes your stomach off and then carries you back to the bed.

You let him arrange you in his arms, and then snuggle into him, into safety, into love.

Chapter End Notes

i literally cant express how badly i want comments on this thing. please.

also, if you think this fic is worth recommending to others, please do!

Works inspired by this [one](#) [Cure My Heart and Mind](#) by [PsycheStar](#)

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